ELLERY QUEEN

THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

June 1986

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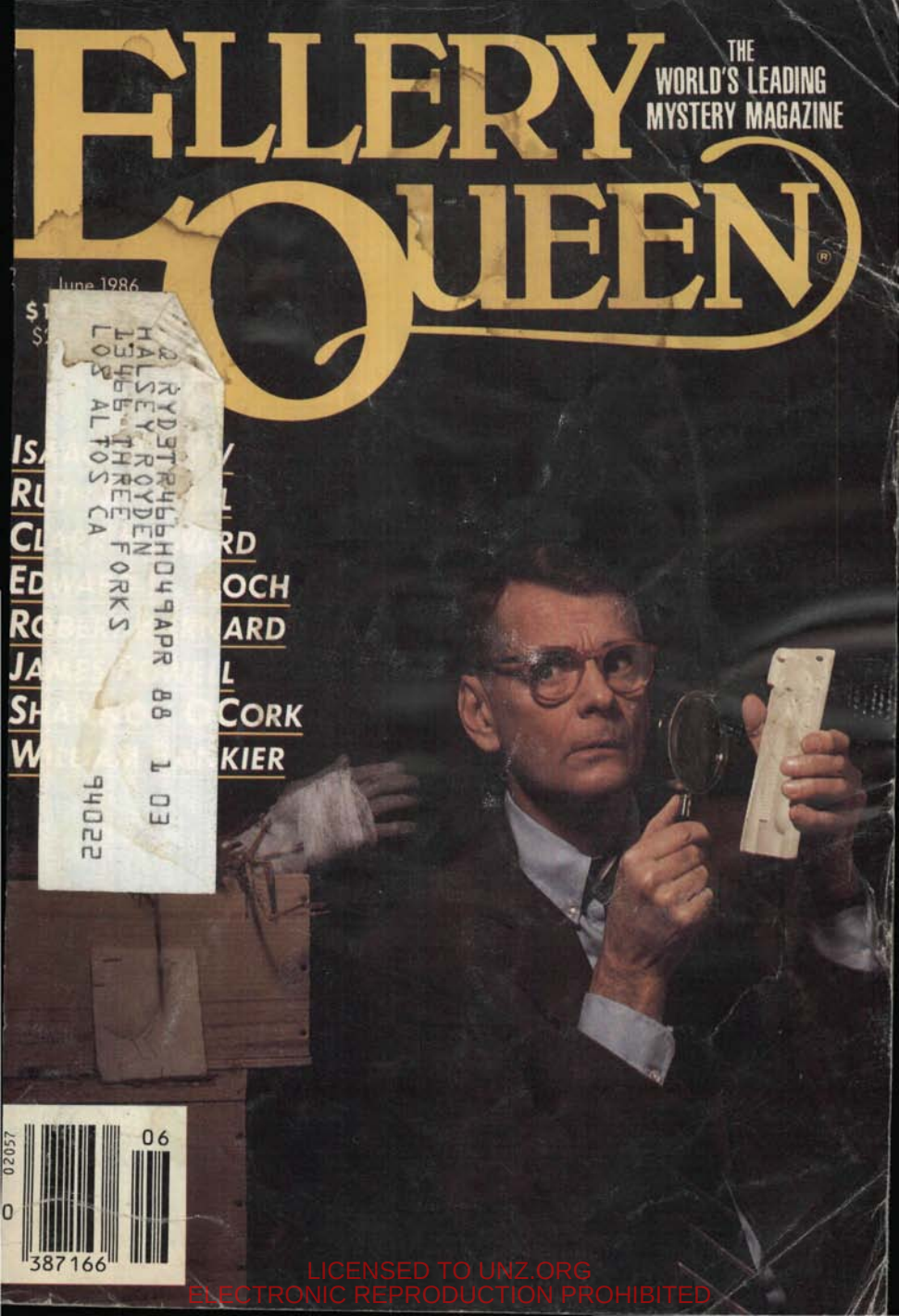

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THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

ELLERY QUEEN®

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CARLETON CARPENTER
actor and mystery writer
(The Peabody Experience)

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a *NEW* Nick Velvet story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

"It'll be a perfect opportunity for you to gain access to Matthew Trask's house," Franklin Bings told Nick. "A reporter and camera crew will be interviewing him for a Miami television show. You might be able to slip in with them."

"Fine," Nick agreed. "But I'll need an advance."

"Your full fee is in this envelope. I don't want to see you again."

"You're very trusting."

"I deal with criminals all the time, Mr. Velvet," the lawyer said. "I know the honest ones from the dishonest ones . . ."

THE THEFT OF THE AUTHOR'S ERASER

by EDWARD D. HOCH

It began as the least mysterious of Nick Velvet's assignments, because his client was quite frank in outlining the motive for the theft. His name was Franklin Bings, and Nick met him at the tropical-fish aquarium in Key West. Nick had flown to Miami and then changed to a regional airline for the 160-mile flight to the small city at the end of the Florida Keys, warned by Bings that traffic on the causeway might be slow because of road repairs.

Key West itself was a surprise, looking more like a New England seacoast town than the rest of south Florida with its steel-and-glass cities. One could almost understand why it had remained in Union hands throughout the Civil War. Seated with Franklin Bings before a large tank of the vividly colored fish, Nick could imagine himself at the Boston Aquarium listening to a Beacon Hill lawyer outline the details of an assignment.

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Franklin Bings was a lawyer, a senior partner in the Boston firm of Bings and Bragg, admitted to the Florida bar, and at the service of clients who had retired and chosen to follow the sun. He was a tall man in his early fifties, with slightly stooped shoulders. Nick guessed he would make an imposing figure in a courtroom. "I want you to steal an author's eraser," he told Nick, his eyes seeming to follow the gliding path of a particularly striking red fish.

"I thought authors used word processors these days—or correcting typewriters."

"Not all of them. Matthew Trask still writes in longhand, with a pencil. He has a secretary type his manuscripts for him. He's a meticulous man, as you may know from his writings."

"I've never read him," Nick admitted.

"When he sits down at his writing desk, he wants a half dozen sharpened pencils by his right hand and a particular type of eraser at his left—one that won't smudge the paper when he uses it. He delights in neatness, even in his first drafts. Once his eraser fell out of sight on the floor and he couldn't write a word until it was found."

"I'm to steal the eraser so he won't write?"

"Exactly. You catch on fast, Mr. Velvet."

The red fish darted behind a rock and then emerged suddenly with a mate. "Won't he have a second eraser?"

"No. They're quite large and last for some time. He buys pencils by the gross, but the erasers are another matter. Of course, the pencils themselves are equipped with erasers, but he claims they smudge the paper."

"My fee is twenty-five thousand dollars."

"I know, and you never steal anything of value. I assure you, these erasers sell for less than a dollar at the local stationery store. But you'll be stealing his tomorrow—Sunday—and the store won't be open until Monday."

"What is it he'll be writing that bothers you so much?"

"It concerns a complicated lawsuit. I don't need to go into the details."

"Matthew Trask lives here in Key West?"

The lawyer nodded. "There's always been a sizable artistic and literary colony here. John James Audubon and Ernest Hemingway produced some of their finest work here, and in more recent times Tennessee Williams and other writers have spent at least part of the year here. Matthew Trask comes down from New York in January and usually stays until April."

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Nick was vaguely aware of Trask as the author of several best-selling novels, tough chronicles of disillusioned Vietnam veterans caught up in the Caribbean drug traffic. Nick wasn't a book reader by nature, but he knew Gloria had enjoyed the first of the Trask books. "I'll steal the eraser tomorrow," he told Bings, "and deliver it to you."

"*I* don't want the thing! Throw it off the dock for all I care."

Nick found it hard to believe that the mere taking of an eraser would be enough to dissuade Matthew Trask if there was something he really wanted to write, but Bings' wishes were good enough for him. "Do you know if he'll be at home tomorrow?"

Franklin Bings nodded. "It'll be a perfect opportunity for you to gain access to the house. A reporter and camera crew will be interviewing him for a Miami television show. You might be able to slip in with them."

"Fine," Nick agreed. "But I'll need an advance."

"Your full fee is in this envelope. I don't want to see you again."

"You're very trusting."

"I deal with criminals all the time, Mr. Velvet. I know the honest ones from the dishonest ones."

Nick had the evening to kill, but in Key West on a Saturday night that wasn't hard to do. He started out observing a group at the dock that seemed to be celebrating the sunset. Someone told him they did it every night. Then he went into a busy-looking bar. The place was crowded with winter tourists. After a time, his attention was drawn to a corner table where a fresh-faced young woman sat in deep conversation with a bearded male companion. She looked slightly familiar but it took Nick a few moments to place her: he'd seen her on a TV interview show at the Miami airport when he was waiting to change planes.

"Pardon me," he said, going over to their table. Her name escaped him until he saw the SOS monogram on her sweater. "Aren't you Suzanne Stevens?"

She smiled up at him. "So I am! Imagine finding a fan so far from home!" Her eyes twinkled beneath a high forehead.

"Could I buy you a drink?" he asked, pressing his advantage despite a glower from her bearded companion.

She seemed about to decline, but the man got to his feet and said, "I've got to unpack the truck. See you in the morning."

"Okay, Hank."

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Nick spoke up quickly. "My name is Nick Velvet and I'm from New York. I'll bet we're down here on similar errands."

She turned her gaze to him, her automatic smile still in place. "What would that be?"

"To see Matthew Trask tomorrow."

She hesitated, then said, "You can buy me that drink."

He sat down and signaled the waiter. "So you're doing a story on him for the Miami station?"

"A ten-minute segment for our news magazine. Authors don't rate any more than ten minutes, even though I'm a long-time admirer of Mr. Trask's writings. How about you?"

"A mundane business matter, not nearly as exciting as a television interview. What time are you filming him?"

"We'll be setting up around noon, and I hope we can be out of there by two o'clock. We brought a truckload of equipment down from Miami and I have to get it back there tomorrow night."

"Maybe I should come by after you finish up then," Nick murmured.

"What do you know about Matthew Trask?"

"Not very much. In fact, I've never met him."

"Read his books?"

"My wife has. She likes them."

"He may be the Hemingway of our decade. At least that's the line I'm using in the interview."

"Hemingway liked to write about what he'd personally experienced, didn't he?"

"Much of the time, yes. I believe Matthew Trask does the same thing."

Nick happened to glance out the window at that moment. Suzanne Stevens' bearded companion was lounging against a building across the street, watching them. "There's your friend Hank across the street," he said.

"I hardly know the man. He drove the truck down. He'll help with the lighting, but I have my own cameraman."

"I think he's watching us."

She grinned. "Maybe he's interested in you. Just what sort of business are you in, Mr. Velvet?"

"I'm employed by a Boston law firm," Nick answered truthfully. "And you can call me Nick."

They chatted some more about the television business, but the conversation never got back to Matthew Trask. Finally Suzanne

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finished her drink and said, "It's been nice meeting you, Nick. Maybe I'll see you tomorrow."

On the way back to the hotel, Nick saw a Coast Guard vessel moving into the harbor, overtaking a smaller craft. Someone was shouting harsh commands over a loudspeaker while armed men stood ready to board.

"What's all that?" he asked a passerby.

"Narcotics raid. The boat's probably loaded with grass or cocaine. Nothing unusual these days." The man walked on without pausing and Nick did likewise. It occurred to him that Suzanne Stevens and her crew might be interested in a breaking news story, even a routine one, but he had no idea where she was staying. He stopped to look back once at the scene of the action, as a pair of police cars arrived at the dock. The crew of the boat offered no resistance. As they were being led away, a tall, easily recognized figure appeared at dockside, arguing with one of the arresting officers.

It was the lawyer, Franklin Bings.

There was a brief shower on Sunday morning, but then the clouds parted and the temperature started climbing toward the day's predicted high of 71. After breakfast, Nick drove past the Trask home, a large place done in Spanish Colonial style, and parked down the road out of sight. He saw Suzanne Stevens drive up alone a little after eleven and go inside, clutching a briefcase and a book Nick guessed to be Matthew Trask's latest novel.

Just before twelve o'clock, another vehicle pulled up. A portable television camera was unloaded, along with several lights and some sound equipment. Two men were handling the gear and Nick recognized Hank as the driver of the second vehicle. When the other man went inside with the camera, Nick decided to make his appearance. "Hello, Hank," he said. "Need a hand with those lights?"

The bearded man scowled at him. "I met you last night."

"That's right. Nick Velvet's the name. I'm on my way to see Trask, too."

Hank grunted and motioned to a coil of cables. "You can bring that if you want to. I've got the lights."

The inside of the house was bright and airy. Several of the windows stood open, though the temperature was only in the sixties. The cameraman and his assistant were setting up and Suzanne Stevens sat on a big overstuffed sofa next to a bald man in a white suit smoking a pipe.

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"I'm a little early," Nick said to Suzanne. "Perhaps you would do the introductions."

"Oh—all right, certainly. Matthew Trask, this is Nick Velvet."

He shook hands with the author, hoping he'd be taken for one of the television crew. He'd purposely worn a T-shirt under his jacket with that in mind. "How many people do you need to film me?" Trask asked Suzanne with a smile.

"Oh, Nick's not—"

"I'm not part of the crew. But I'd like to see where you do your writing."

Trask got to his feet. "This way."

Nick followed him while Suzanne went to instruct Hank on the placement of the lights. The cameraman, a lanky fellow named Andy, asked, "Are we going to be filming in his workroom?"

"No," Suzanne answered. "Just out here."

Trask worked in a small study lined with unfinished bookcases holding various American and foreign editions of his novels as well as some magazines that had published some of his short stories and articles. "Lots of room for expansion," Nick said, commenting on some empty shelves.

"That's why she doesn't want to film in here. I told her to come back again in ten years."

Nick smiled back at the author and observed the desk top, pencils and a heavy ashtray on the right and a single oblong eraser on the left. He also noted a work in progress—a half dozen sheets covered with neat handwriting in pencil. The first page showed from under the pile and Nick could read its title. *Gulf Stream High.* The first sentence, all that was visible, read: "When Jeff Oden asked me to make a cocaine run with him on his boat, I thought it would be a fine opportunity to research my next book."

Jeff Oden.

Nick wondered if it was a real name and if Jeff would appreciate being written about. "You even work on Sunday," Nick commented.

"I work every day," Trask replied. "This is a magazine piece I promised to do. Non-fiction."

"Interesting. I don't suppose there are many authors left who write in longhand."

"You'd be surprised. It's just that most of them don't like to admit it. Word processors are very chic these days." He stood with crossed

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arms, apparently puzzled by Nick's presence. "Just what is it you do for the station if you're not part of the crew?"

Before Nick could answer, they were interrupted by a dark-featured young woman who might have been Cuban. "Matthew, Miss Stevens has suggested coffee. Should I make some sandwiches as well?" she asked from the doorway.

"Just the coffee," Trask replied, none too graciously. "They won't be staying long and I have to get back to work. Carmen, this is Nick Velvet, one of the TV people."

Nick smiled and made no attempt to correct the introduction. "Pleased to meet you," Carmen said with a smile. "Matthew's recent fame seems to be bringing more and more people to our doorstep." She spoke with a slight Spanish accent. Nick assumed she was something more than a housekeeper.

"He's a fine writer," Nick told her. "I haven't read anything like him since Hemingway."

Trask snorted. "I wish someone would compare me to Bellow or Updike or Styron sometime. I'd rather be linked with a living writer."

As Nick left the workroom and returned to Suzanne Stevens and her crew, he didn't especially care who Matthew Trask was compared to. He had the man's eraser in his pocket and he'd just earned his $25,000 fee.

They started taping around one o'clock, with Suzanne seated casually on the sofa next to Trask. Nick stood off to one side, watching, and Carmen came to join him. "Have you been in the television business long?" she asked.

"This is my first big assignment."

"What do you do?"

"I'm a producer of sorts. Would you like to be in this scene with Mr. Trask?"

She giggled a bit. "I wouldn't mind, but he would. He'd worry about what his ex-wife would think."

"He must lead an adventurous life down here."

Carmen nodded. "He's always going off on the boats as if he was one of his own characters. Jeff Oden talks him into it, and Matthew goes along. He says it keeps him young."

"I noticed he's writing an article about one of his trips."

"That's right. For a big New York magazine. They've promised

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him lots of money, but Jeff Oden won't like it. I tell Matthew he should change the names at least."

Hank signaled to them for silence. "Quiet—we're taping!"

They listened to Trask describe his work habits and Nick decided the segment would come through as pretty dull for television—most viewers would probably change channels long before the ten minutes ended. Carmen must have picked up on Nick's reaction and thought the same, because she signaled him to follow her onto the back porch.

"I listen to Matthew all day," she explained. "I like to talk to other people when I get the chance. Who is that fellow who told us to be quiet?"

"His name's Hank. He drove down from Miami with the equipment."

"He looks familiar. I might have seen him around the bars."

Nick decided to take a chance, since she seemed so willing to talk. "Have you ever heard of a lawyer named Franklin Bings?"

"A tall man? He speaks slowly?"

"That's him."

"I met him once with Jeff Oden. I think he's Jeff's lawyer."

Nick nodded. He wasn't surprised. "I'd better go back inside."

They were just finishing the taping. Andy, the cameraman, adjusted his equipment to get some reaction shots of Suzanne for intercutting later during the editing process.

"If you're finished with me," Trask said, drinking from a cup of coffee, "I really should get back to my writing."

"Certainly," Suzanne told him. "It's been a pleasure. I think we've got a great interview."

Andy produced a paperback copy of *Sea at Midnight,* Trask's first novel. "Could I ask you to sign this for me?"

"Happy to," Trask replied. He wrote a few words on the title page and signed his name. Then he said goodbye to everyone and retreated into his study, closing the door behind him.

Nick decided it was time for him to go, but before he did the study door opened again and the author called, "Carmen, what happened to my eraser?"

"I don't know. Isn't it on your desk?"

"No, it isn't!" He retreated into the study.

"What's the trouble?" Suzanne asked Carmen, who sighed.

"He claims he can't write if his paper and pencils and eraser aren't just so on his desk. The last time this happened he threw a terrible scene and couldn't write for two days. He prefers these very large

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erasers that last forever and so he only buys one at a time. This time I'm ready for him, though. I have an extra supply upstairs."

She went off and Nick's spirits sank. Was he obliged to steal a second eraser as well? He should have left the house before the taping was finished. But he waited until Carmen returned and presented the eraser to Trask. "Where'd you find it?" he heard Trask grumble.

"I didn't. This was an extra I had. A gift for you." She left the study, closing the door behind her.

Nick went back to the living room where the crew was packing up their gear. If he was to steal the second eraser, he had to come up with an excuse for entering Trask's study. He was startled when he heard a thump from the study.

"He's in a bad mood," Carmen informed them. "He's slamming drawers."

"Damn," Suzanne said, "I forgot to ask him to sign my copy of *Treading Water*." She picked up the book she'd brought with her and opened it to the blank flyleaf in front. Nick watched her cross to the study door and knock. She didn't wait for a response but opened it a crack and said, "I'm sorry to disturb you, Mr. Trask, but would you sign my book before we leave?" She entered, leaving the door ajar, and Nick heard her laugh. "Oh, I couldn't do that, Mr. Trask—not on my salary!" Soon she came out, grinning, and closed the door behind her, proudly displaying the inscription for Nick: *For Suzanne Stevens. A toast to a successful interview from your newest fan*. It was in ink, signed with Matthew Trask's familiar sprawling signature. "He said I should buy one of these big houses and move down here," she told him with a chuckle.

Carmen shrugged. "I probably won't see him for the rest of the day if he's working on that article."

Hank and Andy were now loading their gear into the truck outside. Suzanne slipped the book into her bulging briefcase and shook hands with Nick. "I hope we meet again," she said with a smile.

"Will you be staying in Key West tonight?"

"No." She glanced at her watch. "I'll ride back to Miami with Andy and Hank after I return the car to a friend here."

Nick could see it was time for him to be going, too. Carmen stood by the door, waiting to close it after him, while he tried to think of another excuse for entering the study. He'd been paid to steal Trask's eraser and, as things had developed, that seemed to mean both of them. As he chatted with Carmen, trying to delay his departure,

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there was a surprising new arrival on the scene. A grey sedan pulled up in the driveway, blocking the television crew's departure for the moment, and Franklin Bings climbed out.

The tall lawyer hurried up the steps to the front door, pointedly ignoring Nick as he told Carmen, "I must see Trask at once."

"It's too late," Carmen told him. "He's writing the whole thing down, all about your client's little boat trips."

"You don't understand. Jeff Oden was arrested last night when his boat docked. He's in enough trouble already without Trask adding to it."

"I'll go tell him you're here," Nick said, seizing the opportunity. Before Carmen could stop him, he hurried across the hallway, knocked on the door, and entered the author's study.

Matthew Trask was sprawled across his desk, a pen in his hand, his head on the polished wood. He seemed to be dozing, but Nick knew at once that he was dead. There was no sign of the manuscript pages he'd been working on.

The detective sergeant from the Key West police department was a bright young man named Danny Plath. From his striped sportshirt and paint-stained jeans, he might have been summoned from a Sunday at home with his family. He said very little until the doctor finished his examination and straightened up to say, "It looks like poison to me, Danny. I can't tell what kind until we do an autopsy, but it's probably some form of cyanide."

Sergeant Plath nodded, turning to Carmen. "Did he have anything to eat or drink recently?"

"We all had coffee."

"Where are the cups?"

"Out here."

Nick watched him follow her to the outer room where the interview had taken place. He carefully picked up each cup in turn, holding it with a handkerchief, and smelled the dregs of coffee. "This one, I think," he decided, taking a plastic evidence bag from his case on the floor.

"That's the cup he used," Carmen confirmed. "But how could anyone have poisoned it?"

He answered her with a question of his own. "Did you make the coffee?"

"Of course. And I poured it."

"Anyone might have dropped the poison in while reaching for the

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sugar or cream. It's not hard to do, especially if people are talking or distracted."

Franklin Bings spoke up. "I'm an attorney from Boston. I arrived just as the body was discovered. Surely there's no reason for me to remain for questioning."

Sergeant Plath studied him for a moment. "Didn't I see you at the dock last night when we arrested Jeff Oden on his boat? You're his lawyer, aren't you?"

"That has nothing to do with—"

"You stay. All of you stay. I want to know what each one of you was doing here."

"We were interviewing him for my station," Suzanne Stevens said. "And I have to get back to Miami, or at least to a telephone." Andy had already unpacked his video camera and was shooting footage of everything he could, bringing scowls from the police.

Plath turned to Carmen. "You live here?"

"Yes. We were going to be married." Nick had yet to detect any tears, but Trask's death did seem to have shocked her into a sort of numbness.

"He was a pretty famous writer, wasn't he?" the detective asked.

"His death is a great tragedy," Franklin Bings replied. "To think that he would kill himself—"

"Who said he killed himself?"

"You certainly can't suspect one of these people!" The lawyer seemed shocked at the very suggestion. Nick would like to see him in action in a courtroom sometime.

"Where is his manuscript?" Carmen suddenly asked. "Where is the article he was writing?"

"Who was the last person to see him alive?" the detective asked.

"I might have been," Suzanne answered. "While we were packing up, I went in to have my book autographed. He seemed fine then."

"And this missing manuscript?"

"He was working on it," Suzanne told him. "I saw some handwritten pages on his desk."

"Then it must be here," the detective said. "The only window has a screen over it, latched on the inside. Trask may have put it away somewhere when he started feeling sick."

But a check of the drawers revealed nothing. One of the detectives looked under the rug and another searched the bookshelves. Suzanne showed Sergeant Plath the book Trask had signed and he compared the signature with the earlier one on Hank's paperback. Both were

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firm and scrawling. "No sign the poison had hit him yet." Plath handed the book back to Suzanne. "All right," he said. "Listen, all of you. We're going to finish here and remove the body. I want everyone at police headquarters at four this afternoon to make statements."

"I *have* to get back to Miami," Suzanne insisted.

"We'll take you first. You can be on your way by four-thirty."

Franklin Bings cleared his throat. "You certainly don't need me."

"We need you," the detective told him. "Four o'clock. We won't keep you long." He gave directions to headquarters.

While the others departed, Nick found an opportunity to have a few words with Carmen. "What was so important about that article Trask was writing?"

"Matt was always looking for material for his books. He struck up a friendship with Jeff Oden, a former Miami disc jockey who runs a charter fishing-boat business. Jeff was stopped by the Coast Guard a couple of times, but they never found any drugs so they had to let him go. Matt went out with him a couple of times and decided to write an article about it. He didn't feel it would get Oden into trouble with the law."

"But Oden felt differently?"

She lit a cigarette and frowned. "I don't know. I guess there was some trouble about what he was going to say in the article. There were other people involved, too."

"Miami TV people, maybe?"

"I don't know."

"What about that lawyer, Bings?"

"He has a lot of Florida clients. Jeff Oden is one of them."

"Was he trying to stop Trask from writing his article?"

"I don't know. I guess so."

Nick pursued the thought. "Did he talk to you about Trask's work habits, about the kind of pencils he used? Did you mention that eraser?"

"He came by last week when Matt wasn't here. I might have mentioned it in passing." His question had made her uneasy. "You don't think *I'm* involved in his death, do you? I loved him!"

"I'm not the police, Carmen. You've got nothing to fear from me." He put a calming hand on her shoulder. "I'll see you at four."

He went out to his car and found Franklin Bings waiting there for him. The lawyer seemed nervous and irritable. "What were you talking to that woman about?" he demanded.

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"Nothing important. How come you turned up here at the house? Didn't you trust me to do the job?"

"My client was arrested last night. That changed everything. I couldn't gamble on your abilities any more—I had to make certain that article Trask was writing never saw the light of day."

"Even if it meant killing him?"

"You know I didn't kill him, Velvet. He was dead when I arrived."

"I saw one of the TV crew hanging around the docks last night just before the police arrested your client. Maybe he was waiting for the boat to come in. Maybe you paid him to do a job for you, too."

"If I did, at least I got value for my money. If you stole that eraser, how did it happen that Trask was still writing at the time of his death?"

"It seems Carmen had a spare hidden away."

"And you didn't steal that?"

"No." Nick reached into his rented car and felt under the floor mat in the back seat. He brought out the envelope Bings had given him the previous day. "That means you get your money back. Here."

The lawyer accepted it without argument.

As he turned to leave, Nick took the eraser from his pocket. "You might as well have this, too. It's on the house."

Sergeant Danny Plath was waiting for Nick in his office. "I'm glad you came early," he said. "I wanted to talk with you, Velvet. I've been on the phone to New York. Somebody who knows about you says you're a hired thief. What did you steal from Matthew Trask? And who paid you to do it?"

"Nothing and nobody. I'm here on vacation."

"Trask's home isn't exactly open to tourists."

"Unless you plan to press charges against me, I'd suggest you take my statement and let me be on my way."

Sergeant Plath pointed his finger. "I'm not interested in you, Velvet. What I want is the killer of Matthew Trask. I think you know who it is."

"How would I know?"

"My contact in New York tells me you've solved some crimes in the past."

Nick sighed. "I'll give you a hint. Trask was writing an article at the time of his death."

"We know that. My men searched the room for it but we didn't find it."

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"Apparently a number of people tried to stop him from writing it, including this fellow Oden you arrested on drug-smuggling charges. Find the person who took the manuscript and you've got your murderer."

"From the story you people tell, no one could have taken it. Trask was still alive when he inscribed his book for Suzanne Stevens and no one else entered the study until you found the body."

"Correct," Nick said.

"Then how—?"

Nick got to his feet. "That's for you to figure out. You're the detective."

"Not so fast—sit down."

"Are you arresting me?"

The detective hesitated. "I'm asking for your help."

Nick walked to the window and stared out at the street. He'd already lost his fee and the trip had been for nothing. He certainly didn't owe this detective anything, but then he didn't owe Trask's killer anything, either. All he wanted to do was get back to New York, and the fastest way to do that was to help Plath. "I want to see Jeff Oden," he said.

"He's being held at the county jail."

"Maybe a picture will do."

"I've got a mug shot here." Plath reached into the top drawer and passed a photo across the desk.

Nick stared at a slim-faced young man with a high forehead. "All right."

"That tells you who killed Trask?"

"I already knew who. This tells me *why*."

Just then Suzanne Stevens poked her head in at the door and spoke impatiently to Sergeant Plath. "I thought you were going to take me first so I could get back to Miami."

Nick held up the photograph. "Don't you want to see your brother Jeff before you head back? After all, you did commit a murder for him."

She sat down hard, the color draining from her face. "What are you talking about?"

"The monogram on that sweater you wore last night is SOS, but the larger middle initial in monograms usually indicates the last name. You only use Suzanne Stevens in your work but I suspect

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your full name is Suzanne Stevens Oden. This picture of Jeff shows a strong family resemblance."

"You think I'd commit murder for my brother?"

"Perhaps. Or maybe you were on that boat yourself and you were afraid Trask would ruin your career by mentioning it. You're the only one who could have stolen that manuscript—when you went in to get the book signed."

"You think he'd just let me walk off with it?"

"He couldn't stop you. He was dead. I imagine he died when we heard that thump earlier. He probably knocked the heavy ashtray off his desk and you put it back so we wouldn't connect the sound with the time of his death."

"And a dead man inscribed my book?"

"That was the clever part. Trask had inscribed it earlier, during the half hour you were alone with him before the others arrived. I might have guessed that from the wording. *A toast to a successful interview* implies it was written before the interview. After he inscribed it, you poisoned his coffee when no one was looking. Of course, you didn't know where he'd be when the poison hit him, but when you heard the thump from the study you guessed he was dead, or close to it. You'd prepared for just such a possibility by simply removing the jacket of the book and putting it back on upside down. When you opened the cover to show us the blank front flyleaf, we were actually looking at the blank *rear* flyleaf. When you entered the study, you made a remark as if in answer to Trask, replaced the fallen ashtray, switched the pencil in his hand to a pen you had with you, reversed the jacket of the book again, folded his handwritten manuscript inside the book itself, and left the study, displaying the inscription. I thought it was odd that you stuffed the book inside your already full briefcase when you'd carried it separately earlier, but that was because it now contained the manuscript."

"You think you can prove that?"

"Proving it is Sergeant Plath's job. I think he'll find the manuscript if he searches your car and belongings. I proved it to myself when I saw the pen in Trask's dead hand. We know he wrote his manuscripts in pencil. You placed a pen there so it would look as if he'd signed your book before he died. But if he'd been alive, he'd have picked up a pencil again to continue working. If he was so near death that he kept clutching the pen, it would have shown in his handwriting in the book."

That was good enough for Plath. "I'll have to hold you for further

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questioning, Miss Stevens. As for you, Velvet, I think you were hired to steal that manuscript yourself."

"I assure you I wasn't. If you think about it, Miss Stevens here was the only logical thief. Franklin Bings never entered the study. Trask's friend Carmen had plenty of easier opportunities to steal it. And the other television people, Hank and Andy—"

"Yeah, what about them?"

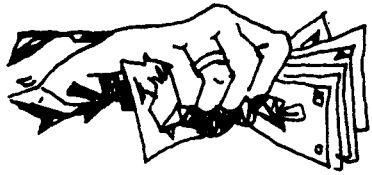
"Miss Stevens set up the interview. She controlled the timing. She ordered the coffee." She was much more efficient than Franklin Bings, Nick thought. The lawyer had hired Nick to delay the article, but her dash of poison in Trask's coffee had cancelled it permanently.

"Do you wish to make a statement?" Plath asked her.

"I want a lawyer."

"Try Franklin Bings," Nick suggested.

On the way back to Miami, he remembered the time he'd received two fees for stealing one object. This trip had netted him nothing. But he supposed it averaged out over the long run. Life was like that.



DETECTIVERSE

RUNNING FROM THE GAUNTLET

by ANITA SIEGEL

Though he's normally mild as a tame turtle dove,
He won't stand for cheating in money or love.

And those who would flee
With his big two-five fee
Find a cast-iron fist in the Nick Velvet glove.

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a *NEW* short story by

SHANNON OCORK

As Mifflin in his cups bowed over the salmon salver, Miss Violet saw how sadly he had fallen off the mark. He had lost his paunch in the last six months and had not had his uniform refitted. His hair, two regal silver wings, was parted in the center of his head as usual. But the part was crooked. And dandruff—yes, it was *dandruff—littered what once had been pristine shoulders of moss-green livery. His shirt was misbuttoned, too, and there was a faint brown stain on the front just where the left lapel of the jacket crossed his heart . . .*

MIFFLIN MUST GO

by SHANNON OCORK

Mifflin hiccuped. It was a small, involuntary hiccup and he swallowed it immediately, but he was bending over his elder mistress's left elbow at the time, offering the dinner fish. Miss Marianne Wycliffe, 71, pretended not to hear. And she kept her nose from wrinkling at the butler's moist, alcoholic breath. But her eyes blinked rapidly in maidenly alarm as she reached for the serving fork. The Crown Derbyshire platter dipped toward her as it should not have done, the sauce hollandaise pooled dangerously upon the beveled rim. With a hand that trembled, Miss Marianne served herself a portion of poached salmon.

"Thank you, Mifflin," she said with a faint voice. But firmly she replaced the serving fork. And firmly she tilted up the platter.

Mifflin lurched back, straightened almost to his full height, and, listing slightly to starboard, shuffled down the Kilim carpet the

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length of the satinwood table to his other employer, Miss Violet Wycliffe, 69.

The younger of the two spinster sisters warily watched him approach. For a moment she thought the better thing would be to refuse the salmon entirely. But she was keen for cook's fish. Mrs. Perez was new to the Wycliffe house. She had studied in New York under Monsieur Claré and had come highly recommended by the late Mrs. Lockholm. Fish dishes were Mrs. Perez's speciality. Miss Violet decided she would emulate her sister's bravery.

The platter swayed at her left side now. To reassure herself, she looked up at the once-elegant figure who had been in their service for forty years. He had come into the house at nineteen as underbutler, straight off the boat from London, where he had apprenticed to Lord and Lady Arleigh of Kent.

He had been tall and solid then, and, from the first, the paradigm of the perfect butler. He was always correct in manner, always fastidious in dress and impeccable in service. Among their set Mifflin had been, and still was as far as the Wycliffe sisters knew, the envy of the Connecticut shoreline.

Now as Mifflin in his cups bowed over the salmon salver, Miss Violet saw how sadly he had fallen off the mark. He had lost his paunch in the last six months and had not had his uniform refitted. His hair, two regal silver wings, was parted in the center of his head as usual. But the part was crooked. And dandruff—yes, it *was* dandruff—littered what once had been pristine shoulders of moss-green livery. His shirt was misbuttoned, too, and there was a faint brown stain on the front just where the left lapel of the jacket crossed his heart.

She must have stared too long, for when she lowered her lavender eyes and reached for the silver fork she saw that the lake of hollandaise was overflowing the platter and the baby salmon was swimming toward her lap.

With a deftness she was later to congratulate herself upon, Miss Violet deflected the catastrophe. She rose from her Eighteenth Century dining chair quicker than she thought she could with her weak ankles. She righted the platter with both hands and saved the fish. But a few drops of hollandaise yellowed the table linen.

"Mifflin," she said in her tiny lilt. "Kindly watch yourself. The sauce has splattered on the cloth."

Incredibly, Mifflin hiccuped again, a loud hiccup he was unable to defeat. He tripped backward, red-faced, red-eyed. "Madam," he

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said when he could, "madam, please forgive me." Recklessly, he balanced the precious platter in one unsteady hand. With the other he flicked at the droplets of sauce with his service towel. Then, inexplicably, he set the fish plate upon the soiled spot and bowed ineptly. "Please excuse me," he said in his British baritone and turned his back to his mistresses. Drifting toward the double sliding doors, he missed the hand inset by several inches, but corrected himself and disappeared in an outbreak of hiccups and nasty chuckles. From the drawing-room side, the door slammed shut.

Miss Violet spoke down the table to her sister. "Whatever shall we do, Marianne?" Her sister, being the older, took the lead in such matters.

Miss Marianne had frozen in position with a forkful of salmon halfway to her quivering lips. Still in shock, she completed her gesture, swallowed the fish without chewing, and allowed herself a little shiver. "It's gotten too much," she said. "Much too much. We've closed our eyes too long for old time's sake. He'll have to go, that's all. You know it as well as I do."

"We could lock up the liquor cabinet again," suggested Miss Violet.

"That didn't do a speck of good last time we tried it. And it's not the sherry he's drinking, Violet, it's the brandy. I'm sure he's bringing in his own so we can't measure his intake. It's some of ours one time, some of his the next. Whatever's close to hand."

"Brandy!" breathed Miss Violet. Still on her feet, she limped to the sideboard and brought the vegetable dish to her sister. She lifted the cover and sighed.

Miss Marianne dutifully spooned herself three brussels sprouts. "I caught him at it this afternoon," she said. "He had one of the crystal goblets almost full of our apricot cordial. He drank it down like that—" she snapped her fingers "—when I asked what he was drinking, and told me it was apple juice. As if I don't know brandy when I smell it."

"He does have his good days still," said Miss Violet. She carried the vegetable dish to her own place and sat down.

"Oh, it's no good pretending, dear," said her sister. "These last weeks have been a nightmare. Mifflin's out of control and there's no getting him back. And he'll only get worse. Forget about our reputation—think of his. He may have slipped badly, very badly, but we're the only ones to know it. And the party we're giving in, what is it, ten days? I shudder at the thought, Violet. I truly shudder."

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Miss Violet cut herself a little salmon and gave her plate the smallest brussels sprout. "It's true," she said. "Even on his good days he's not what he used to be." At last she tasted the fish. It was wonderfully good. She had another bite and another and then the brussels sprout.

It really was too bad, she thought. Mifflin had begun drinking in the afternoons last year after their mother died and Marianne had the hip operation and had had to give up her golf. And with the golf gone, so had the socializing and the dinner parties Mifflin loved so much. Alone in the world, the two sisters grew closer and more reclusive. Older. And as a result Mifflin's duties shrank to almost nothing. He was bored, she supposed. That was it. He hadn't, of course, asked to leave. How could he? The Wycliffe family had been his whole life. It was understood he would be with them until the end.

"When Mama died," Miss Violet said, "do you remember how he cried?"

"He was devoted to Mama," said Miss Marianne. "Well, to Daddy, too. He's been really devoted to us all."

"And we've been devoted to him in return, haven't we? I'm sure we have."

"Well, not so much these last few months, dear."

"Poor Mifflin," said Miss Violet. "We'll have to give him his stipend all at once if we dismiss him. All at once and right away."

"Let's give him the choice," said Miss Marianne. "However he wants it is the way it will be."

"What a nice thought," said Miss Violet. "But how will we tell him?"

"Together," said her sister, finishing her lemonade. "We'll sit on the sofa together very close, holding hands. We'll tell him tonight."

"After the toddies?"

"Oh, yes, decidedly after the toddies. For the courage." And Miss Marianne tried to smile away the tremor in her breast.

"For the courage," agreed Miss Violet. She arranged her knife and fork on her plate. "But what about the party, Marianne? If he could only stay sober for that, it would be the perfect finale for him, don't you think? Going out in glory?"

Miss Marianne patted her lips with damask. "I think the party would be quite impossible without him. Anyone new in the house would be lost at such an elaborate affair so early on. And our friends expect Mifflin," she said. "It would ruin everything to have to explain

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his absence over and over." Her flat little bosom heaved. "If only he's able."

"Perhaps we could dangle a carrot," said Miss Violet, "and suggest that his pension depended upon it."

"Yes," said Miss Marianne, "we could give that a try."

The two spinsters, last of the Wycliffe line, rose from their great chairs in somber decision, leaving their napkins to the left of their places as they had done from childhood. They passed, one stiff and straight as though the rod in her hip extended up her spine, the other stooped with arthritis, into the library across the hall where their bedtime toddies awaited.

Cook did not live in as Mifflin did. There was no need. After dinner was prepared, Mrs. Perez left in her sensible Datsun for her little home the other side of Stormfork, on the New Haven side. She drove back mornings at eleven with the daily provisions for luncheon and dinner. She had Sundays off, as did Mifflin. On Sundays the Wycliffe sisters subsisted on crackers and milk.

It was Mifflin's duty to clear the table, Mifflin's duty to handwash the dishes and flatware, Mifflin's duty to dry each piece and put it away. It was Mifflin's duty to undress the table of its dinner cloth and candelabra and redress it for breakfast in cheerful pastel, with the flowers which three times a week the florist delivered at eight. Once the flowers had come from the Wycliffe garden, but that was long ago.

Mifflin did these final chores after making up the sisters' toddies and setting the tray in the library while they were still at table. At their leisure, they poured their own water from the hot pot—the brandy and sugar and cinnamon pre-mixed in the snifters by Mifflin in the kitchen. When the sisters were ready for bed, they rang for Mifflin, discussed the next day's schedule, and dismissed him for the night. This was their long-established and invariable routine.

In the library, the sisters settled themselves before the April fire. Miss Violet made up the drinks. As it was Miss Marianne's turn, she read aloud a chapter from the spy novel they were reading. Miss Violet thrilled to the chase while she longed for the persimmon pudding they had been denied by Mifflin's excusing himself. They both so loved persimmon pudding, but to go to the kitchen for it themselves would have been an unthinkable insult to their butler.

It was going on nine o'clock when Miss Marianne rang the service bell.

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Mifflin was slow in coming, but when he came he seemed much his better self. Gone were the bumbling and the shuffle, gone the red in his eye and the hiccups. His hair was beautifully parted. His jacket shoulders were spotless. He stood before the sisters with immaculate white-gloved hands.

Miss Violet, so close to her sister their dresses intermingled cream and rose, had a tear in her eye. We just can't do it, she thought. No matter what he's come to, he's *ours*. But even as she thought it, she heard her sister say, "Mifflin, dear," and knew retreat was impossible.

Mifflin bowed. "Mesdames," he rumbled.

Miss Marianne told him of their decision in the sweet, direct way that had always been her advantage. She told him of the pension they had established in his name immediately following their mother's death. She told him of their deep affection, great respect, and lifelong gratitude. Mifflin paled as she spoke—paled and paled. Miss Violet listened with chin down and averted eyes. When Miss Marianne had said her piece, she asked Mifflin to remain in service through the dinner party they were giving for their new neighbors; that is, she said, if he thought he could recapture his former standard for one last evening. "It will be a lovely swan-song for you, Mifflin dear, and a courtesy to us."

Miss Marianne ceased speaking. Miss Violet squeezed her sister's hand for comfort. Mifflin was still as a grave and white as wax. Finally he bowed as beautifully as he had in his prime and said, "It has only been my object to comply with your every wish. I shall, when the time comes, try to do you proud. Will that be all, then, for tonight?"

Miss Marianne nodded. Miss Violet nodded. "Thank you, Mifflin, good night, Mifflin," they said for almost the last time.

"Good night, mesdames." Mifflin picked up the cloisonné tray from the Phyfe table and backed from the room with a grace they'd thought never to see in him again.

There was only a little moon when, late that night, Mifflin rose from his bed the other side of the kitchen and crept through the garden to the shed. Vines of rambling rose which had not been cut back for years snagged at his pajama legs and long grass dampened his velvet slippers. But he was not deterred.

He pushed open the shed door with a hand protected by a rubber working glove. By a dim yellow light he searched the shelves for

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the weed killer. He found it in a corner of the second shelf, a rusty tin with a rose on the face and a small skull and crossbones in the upper right-hand edge.

Mifflin consulted the ingredients, peering close at the small type. Arsenic, the list began, 42%. He read no further. With a screwdriver, he pried up the oval top. With a kitchen spoon, he scooped the grey powder into a sugar dish in the shape of a child's red wagon. It was a cracked piece, disposed of by the family and kept by him, with their permission, in his room. He liked the workmanship, the charm, the insouciance of the thing.

The sugar wagon comfortably full, Mifflin tamped back down the oval top and returned the tin to its position, setting it, as best he could, into the dust lines where it had waited, untouched, season after season.

He turned out the light, closed the shed door, and slipped back to the house, one gloved hand over the top of the wagon to keep the poison from spilling.

Back in his room, Mifflin got down on his knees. Under his bed was a cache of brandy, nine bottles in a small wine cage turned on their sides. They were all apricot cordial—an inexpensive brand, but good enough, he'd thought, for him. He drank the brandy to ease the pain of the cancer. "An operation won't help you," Doctor Dunbar had said. "There's not much to be done at this late date, old boy." The doctor had written him a prescription for Nembutal, but so far Mifflin had not used it. As long as he didn't use it, he could pretend there was nothing wrong and rampant in his stomach.

He had never, despite what the sisters thought, helped himself to their fine store unless invited to, as he had been on special occasions in happier days.

With hands that shook a little, Mifflin carefully cut away the bottle's seal with a single slice of a paring knife. Putting the seal aside, he poured half the contents of the dark-brown bottle into his teapot, then he added all the weed killer he had to the bottle, spooning it in through a funnel. Then he refilled the bottle as much as he could and screwed back the top. Tight, tight. He shook the bottle hard, back and forth, up and down, around and around. When he was satisfied that the powder was dissolved, he wrapped the seal around the top again and secured it with transparent tape. Then he tore away a corner of the bottle label as an identifying mark and put the bottle back among its brothers.

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He cleaned up everything, brushed up his slippers, changed his pajamas, and went to bed. He was almost instantly asleep.

The night of the party Mifflin was magnificent, virtually his glorious self of old. The guests-of-honor were the nouveau riche Trenton-Wests, and the Wycliffe sisters' party was their grand entrance into Stormfork society. The beautiful couple had begun life in Stormfork as poor Amy Trenton and plain Arnold West. But as Aimee and Arnie Trenton-West, they had risen, through clever real-estate manipulations and public charities, to become Stormfork's richest and most civically generous couple. Yet perhaps their riches were too quickly amassed and their donations too publicized, for society was slow to open its arms to them. They began their campaign to change this upon the Wycliffe sisters, long Stormfork's social arbiters. They purchased the Hemphill estate next to the Wycliffe house as their residence and named a geriatric wing they'd donated to the hospital the Wycliffe Wing. The sisters were forced to capitulate.

But as Miss Marianne said to Miss Violet after the party was over and they sat in their library among the remnants of lavish desserts, this was the last party the sisters would give. "We're too old to do this again," she said, dipping a spoon into a melted ice-cream bombe.

"And we've retired Mifflin," said Miss Violet. "It would never be the same." She was sampling almond cheesecake.

"It's better to stop now. It was a triumph, but I'm exhausted—not exhilarated the way I used to be."

"And we eat too many sweets at our parties," said Miss Violet, biting into a strawberry glacé petit four.

"Yes." Miss Marianne cut herself a tiny bit of rum-butterscotch pie. "And wasn't Mifflin fine?"

"I was so proud of him!" said Miss Violet with her hand on her heart. "Aimee couldn't sing his praises enough."

"Well," said Miss Marianne, "shall we forego our toddies tonight? We've had so many other sumptuous things already."

"Nevertheless, I think I'll have mine," said Miss Violet. "I want to sleep well and my ankles hurt." Mifflin was in the other rooms directing the hired crew in the cleanup but, as ever, he had set out their toddy tray.

Miss Violet poured hot water into a snifter and stirred the drink with a glass stick.

"Well, I'll join you," said Miss Marianne. "I don't want to be a stick-in-the-mud in my old age."

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They laughed together like young girls, drank the toddies, and picked again and again at the desserts. They sat up late, until almost one, talking about other parties in days gone by.

Just as they started to go upstairs to their beds, Miss Violet felt a sharp stomach pain. "Oh, dear," she said, gasping at the strength of it. "I hope I don't get sick."

Miss Marianne was holding onto the back of the Sheraton loveseat. "I'm not feeling well, either, Violet, my dear."

"As you say," said Miss Violet, "we're too old, Marianne. That's our problem. We'll feel better in the morning."

They helped each other up the broad steps to the second floor. Miss Marianne was able to undress and slip into her nightshift, but Miss Violet lay down in her crepe de chine.

"If you need me during the night you must wake me, do you promise?" Miss Marianne said, breathing rapidly through her nose.

"If you promise the same," said Miss Violet with an effort.

They slept a while. But a second pang came to each of them and then a third, and after that the pain stayed. Doubled and tripled. Each in her turn stumbled to the bath and vomited, but still the pain stayed—and spread.

When they could no longer endure it, they rang for Mifflin. Miss Marianne couldn't remember ever ringing for Mifflin so late or ever before ringing for him from their bedroom.

He did not come at once.

Miss Marianne managed to say, "Perhaps he can't hear it or doesn't understand the bell so late at night."

Miss Violet only moaned weakly in her bed.

Miss Marianne rang for Mifflin again and again. Faintly, she could hear the bell buzzing far away in his room. She thought he must have already left them or that he must be sick himself. But at last she heard a shuffling tread on the staircase.

The light flashed on in the hall. Mifflin, in pajamas and bathrobe, swayed drunkenly in the doorway. He held himself erect by a hand against the doorjamb. Seeing his mistresses in distress, his eyes widened. He looked ready to faint.

"Dr. Dunbar," croaked Miss Marianne. "Tell him it's an emer—" The pain took her voice.

Mifflin backed from the room. "Yes, madam—right away, madam." He fled, a-tilt, down the stairs.

Miss Marianne glanced at the turquoise-and-silver clock on her

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side table. The hands read 3:15. Miss Violet had lost consciousness. She was curled around her stomach, breathing slow, ragged breaths.

Dr. Dunbar arrived at the Wycliffe house at about 5:30 A.M., having received an emergency call from his telephone service at 4:42. When he arrived, a sober, correct Mifflin apologized for taking so long to summon him. He couldn't find the doctor's home telephone number, he said, and he had had difficulty convincing the answering service to put the call through. Then Mifflin showed him to the sisters' room.

Both women were delirious with pain and beyond help. Dr. Dunbar did what he could to make them comfortable, but they died within an hour of his coming. Miss Violet went first. Within minutes, Miss Marianne followed.

Dr. Dunbar telephoned the police and the bodies were removed for autopsy.

The police questioned Mifflin immediately. He told them about the dinner party the evening before. "Mesdames were usually restricted in their diets," Mifflin said. "But they imbibed freely of the champagne last night and of the different desserts. They were up later than usual. I heard them mount the stairs about one. I did not see them after the guests departed, as I was cleaning up and they did not ring. Until much later, that is." That was all Mifflin could tell them. He had, he said, been in Wycliffe employ all his adult life, and other than a few broken bones, some mild colds, and Miss Violet's arthritis, the two sisters had enjoyed an exemplary health.

As the day was Sunday and cook's day off, Mrs. Perez was summoned by the police. Told of the sisters' deaths, she sat down with a thump on a kitchen chair and fanned herself. "Wouldn'tcha know it," she said. "I was so happy in this job. Lovely ladies, the two of them. Real appreciators. Let me cook for them any way I wanted, anything I wanted, and then thanked me for it." She rapped the kitchen table with her knuckles. "It's us who're the losers, mister. We, the living. We've lost more'n them."

"What have we lost, Mrs. Perez?" inquired Lieutenant Axelrod.

The cook raised her chin and looked him in the eye. "Why, we've lost grace," she said. "Why, grace and genteel ways. Sweet little voices and the most lovely manners you ever saw. Angels, that's what we've lost, mister. Angels. Don't tell me no."

Lieutenant Axelrod was silent for several seconds as Mrs. Perez

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nodded her head and rapped her knuckles. Then he said, "Could you tell me about the food served last night? What you cooked?"

Mrs. Perez drew herself up. "Are you insinuating anything about *my* food? I'll have you know I've worked for the best families in Stormfork. Five years with Mrs. Lockholm, may she rest in peace, and before that eight years with Mrs. Melody Combes. Not Cora. Melody. How's that for proper credentials?" She rapped her knuckles on the metal table so hard it echoed. "There has never, *never* been any question about *my* food, mister. Why, I do everything myself. Ground up. I choose my own ingredients, skin every onion. I studied under Monsieur Claré, you know. You'll find no flies on me. No, sir."

It took some time to calm her, but Lieutenant Axelrod with a gentle voice and great patience gradually induced Mrs. Perez to give him the menu for Saturday night.

There had been cocktails and appetizers, with which the cook was not concerned. The appetizers had been catered by Sarton's and delivered hot, straight to the drawing room, which adjoined the dining room where dinner was laid. The two rooms were Mifflin's territory. He had made the cocktails. He had served the hors d'oeuvres.

Dinner had been, first, a crab bisque. "Rose-beige my bisque is, and you won't find the like of it anywhere else this side of the Atlantic. I'm famous for my bisques. It's cayenne gives the lovely pink color." Then had come broiled tomato cups filled with grilled mushroom caps and minced bacon. The main course was breast of chicken Florentine. "That's flattened chicken breast rolled around sautéed spinach and garlic in my secret spiced oil." And glazed baby carrots and Caesar salad. A pear sherbet had completed the meal, and Spanish coffee. Champagne had been the dinner wine. "Not strictly legit, okay, but champagne, mister, is never wrong, no time. And it was a party, doncha see. Festive."

Desserts had been supplied by the different guests. There had been twenty at table and everyone had eaten heartily and well. "And no one else got sick I heard of." Mrs. Perez had left the house at 10:30 with a small bottle of champagne given her by the sisters and a bonus check for her extra work. Mrs. Perez still had the champagne in her pocketbook. She took it out and waved it under Lieutenant Axelrod's nose. "And the check for fifty dollars goes into the bank on Monday," she said and banged on the kitchen table.

"I cooked it, he served it." She gestured toward Mifflin. "I went

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home, he stayed. And there you are, that's all I know." Her nostrils flared. "Only maybe a little more." She leaned close. "He musta done it. In pique, ya see. He's just been—" she put her mouth very close to the Lieutenant's ear "—bumped. Dis*missed* for cause." She pantomimed drinking with an upraised hand, thumb moving back toward her open mouth.

Mifflin denied his dismissal and denied harming his mistresses. Their love of him was such, he said, he thought he had been mentioned in their wills.

While the police waited out the autopsy report, both cook and butler were retained in the house. Mifflin kept to his room, drinking steadily. Mrs. Perez made lunch for Lieutenant Axelrod and Officer Duff: tomato-and-cheese omelettes and watercress salad.

A copy of the sisters' joint will was found in Miss Marianne's Louis XIV escritoire. The trust established for Mifflin was there. It gave him a generous stipend for the rest of his life. The sisters' checkbook was also brought forth. In it was the stub for check #4309: twenty-five-thousand dollars in cash to Mr. Bernard Milcox Mifflin for severance pay. The check stub was seven days old.

Confronted, Mifflin admitted there had been a "misunderstanding." The sisters had dismissed him and paid him off, but they had not meant it. He had been derelict in duty and they had punished him, but he had reformed, he said, and they had rescinded the discharging. He had not cashed the severance check. He showed it to Lieutenant Axelrod with fingers that shook.

Dr. Dunbar called the Wycliffe house with the autopsy results. Miss Marianne and Miss Violet had died from arsenic poisoning. A massive amount.

Mifflin was arrested, formally charged, and booked. His bail was set at $50,000.

In the early evening, Mifflin's bail was posted and he was released. He returned to the Wycliffe house. Mrs. Perez and the police were gone and the house was empty.

The telephone rang. Mifflin answered it, wondering. It was Mrs. Trenton-West. She offered him immediate employment and told him it was she and her husband who had posted his bail. They would also assume his court costs.

Mifflin wept. "This is so kind of you," he said, "to open your house to me when I might be a monstrous murderer. I am overcome."

Mrs. Trenton-West minimized her efforts on Mifflin's behalf.

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"Your room is ready here," she said. "I shall expect you tomorrow morning."

The next day, still weeping, Mifflin packed his things. With several belts of brandy to brace himself and with his two valises on a rolling rack, he walked the half mile to the old Hemphill estate and presented himself at the side door.

Mrs. Trenton-West opened the door to him. She was wearing an apron over a tennis dress of linen lace. She appeared to be making brunch—a bowl of batter and a portable mixer stood on the tiled island in the middle of the enormous kitchen.

"As you can see," she said, cocking her handsome head, "I haven't got a steady cook yet. But I've got you. Come in."

Mifflin left his bags outside, entered, and stood respectfully before her. He had his speech all ready. "I came," he said, "to thank you personally for all you've done for me. But I cannot work for you, dear lady. I shall never work in service again. I am not well enough. I shall stand my trial and take my punishment if convicted or retire if they let me go. I came to assure you the monies you posted in my behalf will not be lost and to kiss your hand for your lovely kindness."

Aimee Trenton-West thrilled at Mifflin's dignity of bearing. "Let's understand each other, Mifflin," she said, staring at him as at a prized antique. "I know very well you're no murderer. What do you take me for? But even if you were, that wouldn't stand in my way one bit. I didn't get to where I am without risk. Do you understand? I'd do anything, *anything*—now do you understand?—for the perfect butler."

Mifflin bowed. He was remembering the dessert of Aimee Trenton-West. Persimmon pudding, the Wycliffe sisters' favorite. She had sent it over early in the afternoon. There had been only the two cups, pretty *muguet des bois* cache pots of Sèvres porcelain rimmed in royal blue. They were signed only, "with delicious thanks."

Miss Marianne and Miss Violet had eaten the puddings in the quiet of the library before the party began. After they had finished, they asked Mifflin to fill the cups with little flowers and set them on the table at dinner.

So now Mifflin did understand. But no longer did he pale when struck by thunderbolts. Mifflin had toughened.

He straightened. "In that case," he said in his peerless British mumble, "perhaps you will allow me, this one time, to finish preparing luncheon for you and Mr. Arnold. I could serve in, let us say, an hour?"

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"Delighted!" said Mrs. Trenton-West. Here was a butler she could live with. She whipped off her apron and handed it over to him and fluffed out her tawny hair. "Arnie's down at the stable. I'll run and tell him—he'll be as excited as I am. But first I'll show you to your room."

The room was large and wood-paneled. There were horse prints on the wall, Stubbs' reproductions. A wide window looked in the direction of the Wycliffe house. It was a handsome room for an Englishman, but Mifflin barely noticed. He unpacked quickly, only his uniform and toilet articles and the unopened bottle of arsenic-full brandy he had mixed last week with the intention of ending it all when he left the Wycliffe employ.

He shaved for the second time that morning. He scented. He brushed up his uniform and shined his shoes. Then he split the seal on the brandy and poured half of it into a silver pocket flask he then tucked into his jacket pocket.

He checked the dining room. The table had already been laid. He went to the kitchen. It was surrounded by windows. Looking out, he saw Mr. Trenton-West on a great chestnut hunter cantering around the lawn in riding coat and jodhpurs. The man did not ride well. He rocked in the saddle like a cowboy and drummed the horse's sides with his stirrups. Mrs. Trenton-West was watching her husband, laughing and flicking a black buggy whip whenever the chestnut swung within its reach.

Mifflin put on the apron, picked up the portable mixer, and set the batter spinning. Chutney crepes, he thought. They'll like that. And green beans almondine. He pulled out the silver flask and poured in the tainted brandy. Golden-brown lines whirled into thick yellow. The batter warmed to the color of eggshell.

In all probity, he thought, it was the least he could do for his mistresses. He knew he was no longer what he used to be. But Miss Marianne and Miss Violet had been right. Standards. One had to try to live up to them. To the end.

And, after all, he smiled to himself thinking ahead to his trial, he might as well be hung for a horse as a hare. The mixer sang under his hand.

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A DARK BLUE PERFUME

by RUTH RENDELL

It would be true to say that not a day had passed without his thinking of her. Except for the middle years. There had been other women then to distract him, though no one he cared for enough to make his second wife. But once he was into his fifties the memory of her returned with all its old vividness. He would see other men settling down into middle age, looking towards old age, with loving wives beside them, and he would say to himself, Catherine, Catherine . . .

He had never, since she left him, worked and lived in his native land. He was employed by a company which sent him all over the world. For years he had lived in South America, Africa, the West Indies, coming home only on leave and not always then. He meant to come home when he retired, though, and to this end, on one of those leaves, he had bought himself a house. It was in the city where he and she had been born, but he had chosen a district as far as

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possible from the one in which she had gone to live with her new husband and a long way from where they had once lived together, for the time when he had bought it was the time when he had begun daily to think of her again.

He retired when he was sixty-five and came home. He flew home and sent the possessions he had accumulated by sea. They included the gun he had acquired forty years before and with which he had intended to shoot himself when things became unendurable. But they had never been quite unendurable even then. Anger against her and hatred for her had sustained him and he had never got so far as even loading the small, unused automatic.

It was winter when he got home, bleak and wet and far colder than he remembered. When the snow came he stayed indoors, keeping warm, seeing no one. There was no one to see, anyway, they had gone away or died.

When his possessions arrived in three trunks—that was all he had amassed in forty years, three trunkfuls of bric-a-brac—he unpacked wonderingly. Only the gun had been put in by him, his servant had packed the rest. Things came to light he had long forgotten he owned, books, curios, and, in an envelope he thought he had destroyed in those early days, all his photographs of her.

He sat looking at them one evening in early spring. The woman who came to clean for him had brought him a bowl of blue hyacinths and the air was heavy and languorous with the sweet scent of them. Catherine, Catherine, he said as he looked at the picture of her in their garden, the picture of her at the seaside, her hair blowing. How different his life would have been if she had stayed with him! If he had been a complaisant husband and borne it all and taken it all and forgiven her. But how could he have borne that? How could he have kept her when she was pregnant with another man's child?

The hyacinths made him feel almost faint. He pushed the photographs back into the envelope but he seemed to see her face still through the thick, opaque brown paper. She had been a bit older than he—she would be nearly seventy now. She would be old, ugly, fat perhaps, arthritic perhaps, those firm cheeks fallen into jowls, those eyes sunk in folds of skin, that white column of a neck become a bundle of strings, that glossy chestnut hair a bush of grey. No man would want her now.

He got up and looked in the mirror over the mantelpiece. He hadn't aged much, hadn't changed much. Everyone said so. Of course, it was true that he hadn't lived much, and it was living that

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aged you. He wasn't bald, he was thinner than he had been at twenty-five, his eyes were still bright and wistful and full of hope. Those four years' seniority she had over him, they would show now if they stood side by side.

She might be dead. He had heard nothing, there had been no news since the granting of the divorce and her marriage to that man. Aldred Sydney. Aldred Sydney might be dead, she might be a widow. He thought of what that name, in any context, had meant to him, how emotive it had been.

"I want you to meet the new general manager, Sydney Robinson."

"Yes, we're being sent to Australia—Sydney actually."

"Cameron and Sydney, Surveyors and Valuers. Can I help you?"

For a long time he had trembled when he heard her surname pronounced. He had wondered how it could come so unconcernedly off another's tongue. Aldred Sydney would be no more than seventy, there was no reason to suppose him dead.

"Do you know Aldred and Catherine Sydney? They live at number twenty-two. An elderly couple, yes, that's right. They're so devoted to each other, it's rather sweet."

She wouldn't still live there, not after forty years. He went into the hall and fetched the telephone directory. For a moment or two he sat still, the book lying in his lap, breathing deeply because his heart was beating so fast. Then he opened the directory and turned to the S's. Aldred was such an uncommon name, there was probably only one Aldred Sydney in the country. He couldn't find him there, though there were many A. Sydneys living at addresses which had no meaning for him, no significance. He wondered afterward why he had bothered to look lower, to let his eyes travel down through the B's and find her name, unmistakably, incontrovertibly, hers. Sydney, Catherine, 22 Aurora Road.

She was still there, she still lived there, and the phone was in her name. Aldred Sydney must be dead. He wished he hadn't looked in the phonebook. Why had he? He could hardly sleep at all that night and when he awoke from a doze early in the morning, it was with her name on his lips: Catherine, Catherine.

He imagined phoning her.

"Catherine?"

"Yes, speaking. Who's that?"

"Don't you know? Guess. It's a long, long time ago, Catherine."

It was possible in fantasy, not in fact. He wouldn't know her voice now; if he met her in the street he wouldn't know her. At ten o'clock

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he got his car out and drove northward across the river and up through the northern suburbs. Forty years ago the place where she lived had been well outside the great metropolis, separated from it by fields and woods.

He drove through new streets, whole new districts. Without his new map he would have had no idea where he was. The countryside had been pushed away in those four decades. It hovered shyly on the outskirts of the little town that had become a suburb. And here was Aurora Road. He had never been to it before, never seen her house, though on any map he was aware of precisely where the street was, as if its name were printed in red to burn his eyes.

The sight of it at last, actually being there and seeing the house, made his head swim. He closed his eyes and sat there with his head bent over the wheel. Then he turned and looked at the neat, small house. Its paint was new and smart and the fifty-year-old front door had been replaced by a panelled oak one and the square bay by a bow window. But it was a poor, poky house for all that. He sneered a little at dead Aldred Sydney who had done no better than this for his wife.

Suppose he were to go up to the door and ring the bell? But he wouldn't do that, the shock would be too much for her. He, after all, had prepared himself. She had no preparation for confronting that husband, so little changed, of long ago. Once, how he would have savored the cruelty of it, the revenge! The handsome man, still looking middle-aged, a tropical tan on his cheeks, his body flat and straight, and the broken old woman, squat now, grey, withered. He sighed. All desire for a cruel vengeance had left him. He wanted instead to be merciful, to be kind. Wouldn't the kindest thing be to leave her in peace? Leave her to her little house and the simple pursuits of old age.

He started the car again and drove a little way. It surprised him to find that Aurora Road was right on the edge of that retreating countryside, that its tarmac and grey paving stones led into fields. When she was younger she had possibly walked there sometimes, under the trees, along that footpath. He got out of the car and walked along it himself. After a time he saw a train in the distance, appearing and disappearing between green meadows, clumps of trees, clusters of red roofs, and then he came upon a signpost pointing to the railway station. Perhaps she had walked here to meet Aldred Sydney after his day's work.

He sat down on a rustic seat that had been placed at the edge of

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the path. It was a very pretty place, not spoilt at all, you could hardly see a single house. The grass was a pure, clean green, the hedgerows shimmering white with the tiny flowers of wild plum blossom which had a drier, sharper scent than the hyacinths. For the time of year it was warm and the sun was shining. A bumble bee, relict of the past summer, drifted by. He put his head back on the wooden bar of the seat and fell asleep.

It was an unpleasant dream he had, of those young days of his when he had been little more than a boy but she very much a grown woman. She came to him, as she had come then, and told him baldly, without shame or diffidence, that the child she carried wasn't his. In the dream she laughed at him, though he couldn't remember that she had done that in life, surely not. He jerked awake and for a moment he didn't know where he was. People talking, walking along the path, had roused him. He left the seat and the path and drove home.

All that week he meant to phone her. He longed fiercely to meet her. It was as if he were in love again, so full was he of obsessional yearnings and unsuspected fears and strange whims. One afternoon he told himself he would phone her at exactly four—when it got to four he would count ten and dial her number. But when four came and he had counted ten, his arm refused to function and lift the receiver—it was as if his arm were paralyzed. What was the matter with him that he couldn't make a phone call to an old woman he had once known?

The next day he drove back to Aurora Road in the late afternoon. There were three elderly women walking along, walking abreast, but not going in the direction of her house, coming away from it. Was one of them she?

In the three faces, one pale and lined, one red and firm, the third waxen, sagging, he looked for the features of his Catherine. He looked for some vestige of her step in the way each walked. One of the women wore a burgundy-colored coat, and pulled down over her grey hair a burgundy-felt hat, a shapeless pudding of a hat. Catherine had been fond of wine-red. She had worn it to be married in, married to him and perhaps also to Aldred Sydney. But this woman wasn't she, for as they passed him she turned and peered into the car and her eyes met his without a sign of recognition.

After a little while, he drove down the street and, leaving the car, walked along the footpath. The petals of the plum blossom lay scattered on the grass and the may was coming into green bud. The sun

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shone faintly from a white, curdy sky. This time he didn't sit down on the seat but left the path to walk under the trees, for today the grass was dry and springy. In the distance he heard a train.

He was unprepared for so many people coming his way from the station. There must have been a dozen pass in the space of two minutes. He pretended to be walking purposefully, walking for his health perhaps, for what would they think he was doing there under the trees without a companion, a sketching block, or even a dog? The last went by—or he supposed it was the last. And then he heard soft footfalls, the sound light shoes make on a dry, sandy floor.

Afterward he was to tell himself that he knew her tread. At the time, honestly, he wasn't quite sure, he didn't dare be, he couldn't trust his own memory. And when she appeared, it was quite suddenly from where the path emerged from a tunnel of trees. She was walking toward Aurora Road and as she passed she was no more than ten yards from him.

He stood perfectly still, frozen and dumb. He felt that if he moved he might fall down dead. She didn't walk fast, but lightly and springily as she had always done, and the years lay on her as lightly and gently as those footfalls of hers lay on the sand. Her hair was grey and her slenderness a little thickened. There was a hint of a double chin and a faint coarsening of those delicate features—but no more than that. If he had remained young, so had she. It was as if youth had been preserved in each of them for this moment.

He wanted to see her eyes, the blue of those hyacinths, but she kept them fixed straight ahead of her, and she had quickly gone out of his sight, lost round a curve in the path. He crept to the seat and sat down. The wonder of it, the astonishment! He had imagined her old and found her young, but she had always surprised him. Her variety, her capacity to astound, were infinite.

She had come off the train with the others. Did she go out to work? At her age? Many did. Why not she? Sydney was dead and had left her, no doubt, ill provided for. Sydney was dead . . . He thought of courting her again, loving her, forgiving her, wooing her.

"Will you marry me, Catherine?"

"Do you still want me—after everything?"

"Everything was only a rather long bad dream . . ."

She would come and live in his house and sit opposite him in the evenings, she would go on holiday with him, she would be his wife. They would have little jokes for their friends.

"How long have you two been married?"

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"It was our second wedding anniversary last week and it will be our forty-fifth next month."

He wouldn't phone, though. He would sit on this seat at the same time tomorrow and wait for her to pass by and recognize him.

Before he left home, he studied the old photographs of himself that were with the old photographs of her. He had been fuller in the face then and he hadn't worn glasses. He put his hand to his high sloping forehead and wondered why it looked so low in the pictures. Men's fashions didn't change much. The sports jacket he had on today was much like the sports jacket he had worn on his honeymoon.

As he was leaving the house, he was assailed by the scent of the hyacinths, past their prime now and giving off a sickly, cloying odor. Dark blue flowers with a dark blue perfume. On an impulse, he snapped off their heads and threw them into the wastepaper basket.

The day was bright and he slid back the sunshine roof on his car. When he got to Aurora Road, the field and the footpath, he took off his glasses and slipped them into his pocket. He couldn't see very well without them and he stumbled a little as he walked along.

There was no one on the seat. He sat down in the center of it. He heard the train. Then he saw it, rattling along between the tufty trees and the little choppy red roofs and the squares of green. It was bringing him, he thought, his whole life's happiness. Suppose she didn't always catch that train, though? Or suppose yesterday's appearance had been an isolated happening, not a return from work but from some occasional visit?

He had hardly time to think about it before the commuters began to come, one and one and then two together. It looked as if there wouldn't be as many as there had been yesterday. He waited, holding his hands clasped together, and when she came he scarcely heard her, she walked so softly.

His sight was so poor without his glasses that she appeared to him as in a haze, almost like a spirit woman, a ghost. But it was she, her vigorous movements, her strong athletic walk, unchanged from her girlhood—and unchanged, too, the atmosphere of her that he would have known if he had been not short-sighted but totally blind and deaf, too.

The trembling which had come upon him again ceased as she approached and he fixed his eyes on her, half rising from the seat. And now she looked at him also. She was very near and her face flashed suddenly into focus, a face on which he saw blankness, war-

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iness, then slight alarm. But he was sure she recognized him. He tried to speak and his voice croaked out:

"Don't you know me?"

She began walking fast away, she broke into a run. Disbelieving, he stared after her. There was someone else coming along from the station now, a man who walked out of the tree tunnel and caught her up. They both looked back, whispering. It was then that he heard her voice, only a little older, a little harsher, than when they had first met. He got off the seat and walked about among the trees, holding his head in his hands. She had looked at him, she had seemed to know him—and then she hadn't wished to.

When he reached home again, he understood what he had never quite faced up to when he first retired, that he had nothing to live for. For the past week he had lived for her and in the hope of having her again. He found his gun, the small unused automatic, and loaded it and put on the safety catch and looked at it. He would write to her and tell her what he had done. By the time she got his letter, he would have done it—or, better still, he would see her once, force her to see him, and then he would do it.

The next afternoon he drove to her house in Aurora Road. It was nearly half past five, she would be along at any moment. He sat in the car, feeling the hard bulge of the gun in his pocket. Presently the man who had caught her up the day before came along, but now he was alone, walking the length of Aurora Road and turning down a side street.

She was late. He left the car where it was and set off to find her, for he could no longer bear to sit there, the pain of it, the sick suspense. He kept seeing her face as she had looked at him, with distaste and then with fear.

Another train was jogging between the tree tufts and the little red chevrons, he heard it enter the station. Had the green, the many varied greens, been as bright as this yesterday? The green of the grass and the new beech leaves and the may buds hurt his eyes. He passed the seat and went on, farther than he had ever been before, coming into a darkish grove where the trees arched over the path. Her feet on the sand whispered like doves. He stood still, he waited for her.

She slowed down when she saw him and came on hesitantly, rais-

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ing one hand to her face. He took a step toward her, saying, "Please. Please don't go. I want to talk to you so much."

Today he was wearing his glasses, there was no chance of his eyes being deceived. He couldn't be mistaken as to the meaning of her expression. It was compounded of hatred and terror. But this time she couldn't walk on without walking into his arms. She turned to hasten back the way she had come, and as she turned he shot her.

With the first shot he brought her down. He ran up to where she had fallen but he couldn't look at her, he could only see her as very small and very distant through a red haze of revenge. He shot her again and again, and at last the white ringless hand which had come feebly up to shield her face fell in death.

The gun was empty. There was blood on him that had flown from her. He didn't care about that, he didn't care who saw or knew so long as he could get home and reload the gun for himself. It surprised him that he could walk, but he could and quite normally as far as he could tell. He was without feeling now, without pain or fear, and his breathing settled, though his heart still jumped. He gave the body on the ground one last vague look and walked away from it, out of the tree tunnel, onto the path. The sun made bright sheets of light on the grass and long, tapering shadows. He walked along Aurora Road toward the car outside her house.

Her front door opened as he was unlocking the car. An old woman came out. He recognized her as one of those he had seen on his second visit, the one who had been wearing the dark-red coat and hat. She came to the gate and looked over it, looked up toward the left a little anxiously, then backed and smiled at him. Something in his stare must have made her speak, show politeness to this stranger.

"I was looking for my daughter," she said. "She's a bit late today, she's usually on that first train."

He put his cold hands on the bar of the gate. Her smile faded.

"Catherine," he said, "Catherine . . ."

She lifted to him inquiring eyes, blue as the hyacinths he had thrown away.

"Q"

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a *NEW* Black Widowers story by

ISAAC ASIMOV

In "The Acquisitive Chuckle," the very first Black Widowers story, in the January 1972 issue of EQMM, Henry the waiter played a central role. In the story that follows, "Sunset on the Water"—Black Widowers story #53!—Henry continues to play a pivotal role.

You won't be surprised to hear that Isaac Asimov needs little editing. There's just this funny habit of his of capitalizing the words "earth" and "universe" and "sun." Scientists! . . .

SUNSET ON THE WATER

by ISAAC ASIMOV

It didn't take much to make Emmanuel Rubin indignant so that his beard (what there was of it) bristled. It didn't take much more to make him furious and his eyes flash behind his thick-lensed spectacles.

He was somewhere between indignation and rage now and the upstairs room at The Milano, where the Black Widowers met for their monthly banquets, rang with his voice. "I get this fan letter," he said, "and after the usual bosh about how good my books are—"

"Bosh is right," said Mario Gonzalo, staring complacently at the sketch he was making of the banquet guest, a sketch that seemed all eyebrows.

Rubin went on with his sentence, not bothering to stop to demolish the other—usual for him and indicative of the concentrated nature of his anger. "He writes to me that if I'm ever on the Coast I should drop in and he'll put me up."

"Kindly meant, I'm sure," said Roger Halsted, nibbling at a sausage roll—one of the hot appetizers the inestimable Henry had put out as an accompaniment to the drinks.

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"No one can be kind and stupid at the same time," said Rubin, inventing a cosmic law on the spot. "I wrote back and said, 'I'm *already* on the Coast, thank you."

"Good Lord," said Thomas Trumbull, who had arrived three minutes before and had accepted a Scotch-and-soda from Henry with his usual affectation of having just returned from Death Valley and being in the last extremity of thirst. "Is *that* what you're furious about? So what if Californians talk about their coast as though it were the only one in the world? It's just a way of speaking."

"As a matter of fact," said James Drake, who was born in Alaska, "the West Coasters, if you'll excuse that expression, are not the only offenders. As soon as an East Coaster has been in California for five minutes, he begins saying, 'Here on the Coast—' In the same way, you can take a guy from Ohio who has called his native land 'the United States' all his life, put him in Europe for five minutes, and he begins to talk about 'the States.' "

Geoffrey Avalon, host of the banquet on this occasion and noted for his annoying ability to see both sides of a question, said, "Provincialism is not the monopoly of anyone. There is the story of the two Boston dowagers who found themselves in Los Angeles early in October with the temperature at a hundred and five degrees. Said one, 'My goodness, Prudence, it is certainly hot here.' Said the other, 'What do you expect, Hepzibah? We are, after all, nearly three thousand miles from the ocean.' "

Avalon took a sip at his drink in his usual grave way and said, "Tom, you haven't had a chance to meet my guest, Chester Dunhill. Chester, this is Tom Trumbull, who has some sort of sensitive job with the government. He's never specific about it."

Trumbull said, "Glad to meet you, Mr. Dunhill. If our doings here puzzle you, I must explain that it is customary for the Black Widowers to debate furiously over trifles."

Dunhill was a tall man with a thick head of white hair and eyebrows of a startling and bushy black. He said, in a booming bass voice, "We can survive catastrophes. It's the trifles that kill us."

Gonzalo looked startled and seemed about to say something, but Henry announced with quiet finality, "Gentlemen, dinner is served."

Rubin did well with the ham-and-pea soup and wreaked havoc on the broiled sole, and on the rather plain salad. He drew up short, however, at the individual pies handed out in all the pride of their crisp, golden crust. "Henry," he said, "what exists under this crust?"

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Henry said, "I fear, Mr. Rubin, that Mr. Avalon, in a British mood, has asked that we serve steak-and-kidney pie."

"Kidney? *Kidney?*" Rubin looked outraged. "That's liver squared. Jeff, I wouldn't have thought you capable of such a lapse in taste."

Avalon looked pained. He said, "Steak-and-kidney pie, properly prepared, is a great delicacy."

"For whom? Vultures?"

"For every one of us at this table. Why don't you try it, Manny?"

"Kidney tastes like urine," Rubin said intransigently.

Gonzalo said, "So does your favorite brand of beer, Manny, but you guzzle it down."

"For God's sake," said Trumbull, "what kind of dinner conversation is this? Manny, if you can't eat what's set before you, then I'm sure Henry can get you scrambled eggs."

Rubin sneered and said, "I'll eat the steak," and sat sulkily through the main course, the treacle tart, the sardine-on-toast savory, and the strong tea. It made for a quiet dinner, and, as Gonzalo pointed out in dumb show, Rubin did manage to eat the entire pie, kidney included.

Eventually, Avalon rang his spoon against the water glass and said, "Gentlemen, I call on Mario to grill our honored guest, my good friend Chester Dunhill. I've explained the rules of the game to him and he is quite prepared to answer truthfully and completely."

Gonzalo said, "Mr. Dunhill, how do you justify your existence?"

Dunhill blinked, then said, "Well, I try to keep the past alive for the general public. Considering that we can't possibly order the present intelligently unless we learn the lessons of the past, I think I earn my place on earth."

Gonzalo said, "How do you keep the past alive?"

"By writing about it. I suppose I could call myself a historian for the layman."

"Can you make a living from that?" asked Gonzalo.

Halsted put in at once, "Will Durant did, and Barbara Tuchman still does."

Dunhill smiled with an air of diffidence that did not sit comfortably upon him. "I don't exactly put myself in their class. Still, I *do* make a living."

Avalon cleared his throat with vehemence. "May I interrupt? My friend Charles is being needlessly modest. In addition to his histories, he also writes historical novels for teenagers, mostly set in the

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Greece of the Peloponnesian War and the Rome of the Second Punic War. Both novels are critical and popular successes."

Gonzalo said, "Why those periods in particular, Mr. Dunhill?"

Dunhill said, "Both were periods of epic conflict between two nearly equally matched powers—Athens and Sparta in one case, Rome and Carthage in the other. Both wars are well documented and both were filled with great battles, with dramatic triumphs and disasters, with generals and politicians, some brilliant and some idiotic. Both periods, in short, are dead ringers for the period we're living in now. We can understand, sympathize, and see the lessons I try to make plain. What's more, we can't draw an overall conclusion because in one case the adversary we admire won out over the other, Rome defeating Carthage. In the other, the adversary we admire lost, Athens succumbing to Sparta. Of course, I've always had a soft spot in my heart for the Carthaginian general, Hannibal. He's one of three great generals in history who ended a loser without that in the least tarnishing his reputation."

Rubin said, "Napoleon was another. Who was the third?"

"Robert E. Lee, of course," said Dunhill in his booming voice.

Rubin looked discomfited but recovered and said, "I thought you were going to say Charles XII of Sweden, and that would have been wrong."

"That's right," said Dunhill, "it would have been wrong. Charles XII lacked prudence."

"How about generals who never lost?" asked Drake.

"There are quite a few of them," said Dunhill. "Genghis Khan, Cromwell, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, the Duke of Marlborough. Their reputations depend on the manner of their victories and the quality of their adversaries. At least two generals I can think of almost always lost but remained great, considering what they did with what they had. There's George Washington, of course, and General Giap of North Vietnam."

Gonzalo said, "I suppose that in your history books and novels, you deal with the catastrophes that people survive. What are the trifles that can kill you?"

Everyone turned to look at Gonzalo, who grew restive under the communal stare. "What's wrong with the question? Mr. Dunhill said that catastrophes could be survived, but trifles kill us. What trifles did you have in mind?"

"Actually," put in Avalon. "Every defeat suffered by a competent general might be blamed on some trifle. In fact, in *War and Peace*

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Tolstoy argued, in what I found to be tedious detail, the thesis that no general controls a battle, but that trivialities decide it all."

Gonzalo said, "Come on, Jeff, you're trying to get your guest off the hook, and that's unethical. I don't think Mr. Dunhill was thinking about big battles. I think he had something personal in mind. That's the way it sounded to me and that's what I want to know about."

Dunhill shook his head. "It was just a remark."

Gonzalo said, "Remarks aren't made out of nothing. You must have had something in your mind."

Dunhill shook his head again.

Trumbull sighed. "It seemed to me, too, Mr. Dunhill, that when you made that remark something was tearing at you. Jeff said he explained the game to you. You've agreed to answer all questions, and we agree in return to hold everything you say absolutely confidential. If you're willing to state flatly that the statement had no personal meaning to you and that you spoke idly, we will accept that, but please don't say it unless it's the truth."

Avalon said, in a tone of deep discomfort, "I did tell you that this would all be confidential, Chet."

Dunhill said, with a touch of anger in his voice, "There's nothing involved here but a deep personal disappointment that I can hardly bear to think of, let alone discuss. The trouble is that it's a matter of no moment to anyone but me, and others will only laugh at the whole thing. It involves a ridiculous trifle that places all the blame squarely on me. That's the unbearable part. If I could blame it on the government, on fate, on the universe, it wouldn't be so—" He stopped broodingly.

"May we hear about it?" said Gonzalo stubbornly.

"I warn you," said Dunhill. "It's a long story of no interest whatever except to me."

"That's beside the point," said Gonzalo.

"Very well, but you asked for it. —During World War Two, I was a young chap who missed actual Army service—for a few years, anyway—because I was working for the Navy as a chemist. This was in Philadelphia. I was rather an unsocial creature in those days and my chief amusement lay in making my way out to the main branch of the Free Library and reading whatever I came across. And one of the things I came across was *The Historians' History of the World* in twenty-four volumes. It was published in 1902, with a second edition in 1907, with two supplementary volumes carrying

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things through World War One, and an index volume—twenty-seven altogether. Did any of you ever hear of it?"

There was silence. Dunhill went on, "I'm not surprised. To most people, it would be a deadly work. It was long out of print even at the time I came across it over forty years ago, and now—" He shrugged and went on.

"The volumes are a cut-and-paste job. Sections from the Greek and Roman historians and from the modern historians of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries were taken and included in the proper order in a series of histories dealing with the various nations separately. Volumes three and four are on Greece, volumes five and six are on Rome, and so on. There is a great deal of overlapping, of course, but that just means that the same events are described from the viewpoints of different historians, possibly of different nationalities.

"The general editor, Henry Smith Williams, filled in gaps with essays of his own. He was a humane person of liberal views and almost every time I read what I thought was a particularly telling passage, it proved to be one of his. You must understand that it was edited to read as connectedly as possible. There was just an occasional unobtrusive superscript which guided you to the end of the volume, where you found out that you were reading Gibbon or Prescott or Bury or Macaulay or Thucydides or whoever.

"The library had the set in double volumes and I picked them out one by one and quickly found I couldn't bear to stop reading them for anything as dull as my daily work. I took them to the lab with me and read them during lunch or through a partially open desk while I had something boiling slowly under a reflux condenser. My memories of that entire period are vague except for those volumes.

"I had always been interested in history, but it was those volumes that converted that interest into an obsession. The volumes were all terribly old-fashioned, of course, for prior to the Twentieth Century history was almost exclusively a matter of battles and court intrigue. Still, that was what I loved and my own histories are just as old-fashioned. I dwell very little on social and economic issues."

Rubin said, "The social and economic issues would make your histories more valuable."

"And more dull, perhaps," said Dunhill. "I don't omit such things altogether, but I always remember I am writing for the general public, not for scholars. In any case, by the late nineteen fifties, over ten years after I had held those library books in my hands for the

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last time, I abandoned chemistry and began to spend full time on histories and historical novels."

Dunhill paused and seemed to brood a while.

Drake chuckled as he stubbed out a cigarette. "Unless you're telling the story with a total absence of art, which I cannot believe of a novelist, that *Historians' History* is going to turn up again."

Dunhill nodded vigorously. "You are quite correct. A few years ago, I made a new acquaintance, and my wife and I visited his house and had dinner there with several other couples. After dinner, I wandered over to his bookshelves and studied them—a bad habit that exasperates my wife but of which even she cannot cure me. And there, filling an entire shelf, was the *Historians' History*. I hadn't thought of it in years, had all but forgotten it. The instant I saw it, however, everything flooded back. The memory of reading those volumes at a terrible time in modern history, memories gilded and made more wonderful by the passage of years, was achingly sweet and intense.

"I was no longer the impecunious lad of decades ago. I am quite well off now and can afford to cater to my whims. I approached my host at once, therefore, and offered to buy his set. I couldn't believe that it had any attraction to anyone but myself and I was ready to pay far more than it was worth. Unfortunately, my host, for some reason he never explained, would not sell. He was quite emphatic about it.

"I tell you, gentlemen, if there were a million dollars on this table and I knew I could take it without danger of detection, I would not touch it out of a simple sense of honesty. But I actually thought of *stealing* those volumes that my friend would not sell me. It was only the thought of being caught if I tried breaking and entering that held me back. My sense of ethics simply shattered under the strain and I ended the new friendship rather than expose myself to the bitterness of seeing those volumes in someone else's possession.

"I began visiting such second-hand bookstores as I could reach and calling those I could not reach, asking if they had or could get a set of the volumes. I even advertised in the *New York Times Book Review*, in general magazines, and in periodicals of interest to history buffs. The longer I waited the more I was willing to pay if I had to. —And this brings me down to the present."

Halsted said, "I hope you're not going to tell us you drew a complete blank and that's the end of the story."

Dunhill frowned at him, his eyebrows hunching low. He said bit-

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terly, "How I wish I could tell you exactly that. I gave a box number in the advertisements and the booksellers all had my home address, but I got nothing in either case. Nothing. One week ago, however, I picked up a letter at my publishers'. I see them once a week and they usually hold any letters for me that are written in care of them. They're never important—usually they're from people who nitpick some historical point I make, something that must be dealt with but always depresses me.

"I was holding the letter in my hand as I left my publishers' and walked down the street to Grand Central. Idly, I glanced at the envelope and noted that it was addressed in pen-and-ink in a spidery hand, which I accepted as a bad sign. I decided it was from an elderly man who would raise some faint and querulous point concerning some pet theory of his. In a bad temper, I ripped open the envelope and removed the sheet of paper inside. At that point, I passed a garbage truck and tossed the envelope into its yawning maw. But then I had to cross the street, which takes all one's concentration in Manhattan, and shoved the note into my pocket.

"I didn't remember it until I was in my commuter train and, taking out the note, I read it—and a sudden rush of ecstasy filled me. —Here, I have the letter. Let me read it to you."

Dunhill unfolded a letter and read its crabbed handwriting with ease, as though he had memorized it.

" 'Dear Mr. Dunhill, I am a great fan of your books and I read your ad and would like to tell you that I have a complete set of *The Historians' History of the World* that I would be delighted to let you have. My father bought it for me when I was quite young and I enjoyed it greatly. It is still in very good shape and if you are willing to pay me a reasonable price plus all mailing costs, I would have it sent to you by insured express mail.

" 'I would never dream of selling the set, but I am quite old now and will be moving to a little place near my daughter's home and there will be no room for the set there. I am a widower and I'm afraid I cannot live alone any longer. I just can't cope with the harsh winters. It means having to live in a small town instead of in a sizable city. It also means giving up my apartment on the shore where, on clear evenings, I have often watched the sun set into the endless stretch of water so that I almost imagine I can hear it hiss.

" 'Still, if I must give up these books, I can't think of anyone I'd rather give them up to than you. I hope you have many years of

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pleasure with them. Please let me hear from you soon. Sincerely, Ludovic Broadbottom.' "

Rubin said, "Congratulations, Mr. Dunhill. Is everything arranged, or is that where the trivialities come in?"

Dunhill said grimly, "That is where the trivialities come in. Here, look at this letter and tell me where to write."

Rubin took the letter and glanced over the writing which filled one side of the sheet. He turned it over and looked at the totally blank other side.

He said, "There's no return address on it."

"No, there isn't," said Dunhill indignantly. "Can you imagine the stupidity of people who don't put return addresses on their letters and then expect an answer?"

Avalon said, "People who don't put a return address on their letters usually do put it on their envelopes. —Oh," he concluded, remembering.

"That's right," said Dunhill. "I threw the damned envelope away. There are your trifles. Here's a guy who reads an ad that clearly has a box number attached, yet he writes in care of my publishers instead. That not only means a delay of several days, but deprives me of the chance of knowing at once that the letter is important.

"Then I decide, of all things, to open the letter on the street and to discard the envelope into a handy garbage truck without really looking at it. If I had only just noted the name of the city and nothing more, I could have got his address from the city directory. There can't be more than one Ludovic Broadbottom in any one city. And to top it all off, he doesn't include his return address in the body of the letter. What's the result of all these trivialities? I have an offer of my *Historians' History* and I can't reach out and take it."

Gonzalo said, "Is there a bright side, Mr. Dunhill? Can you get other reference books for your histories and novels?"

Dunhill said, with real anguish, "Get other books? I *have* other books. I have two large rooms crammed with historical reference material of the finest sort, to say nothing of the resources of the New York Public Library and of Columbia University. You don't get the point. I want a copy of *Historians' History* for *myself,* for sentimental reasons, for what it's done for me, for what it's *meant* to me. And I *have* it, and can't get it."

For a moment, what was almost a child's whine entered his deep voice. He must have recognized it himself, if belatedly, for he threw

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himself back in his chair, took a deep breath, and said, "Pardon me, gentlemen, I don't mean to rail uselessly at fate."

"Why not?" said Avalon. "We all do it from time to time. But look here, we usually see more than we think we do. You glanced at the envelope long enough to see that it was addressed to you and to note that it was an old man's handwriting—"

"Yes," said Dunhill vehemently, "another trifle. The handwriting threw me off, too, and added to my conviction the letter was unimportant. If he had only typed my address on the envelope, I would surely have treated it with more respect."

"Yes," said Avalon, ploughing on, "but the point is that you must have glanced at the return address, too. If you concentrate quietly, you may remember something about it."

"No," said Dunhill hopelessly. "I've been trying for days. It's useless."

Trumbull said, "Why don't we work from what he says in his letter? He lives in a sizable city on the shore, and sees the sun set over the ocean. That means he's on the West Coast—or 'the Coast,' to quote Manny's fan. Here in New York we can see the sun rise out of the water but never set into the water. Can we make a start with that?"

Dunhill seemed to have recovered his self-control. He said, "Gentlemen, I have been a chemist and I am a historian. I'm used to the process of reasoning. Please note, however, that he talks of the harsh winters he experiences and he can no longer endure. Neither Los Angeles nor San Francisco can possibly be considered as having harsh winters. No city on the West Coast can."

Gonzalo said, "Seattle is pretty damned rainy. I was there once and you can believe me. That might sicken anyone."

"Then he would speak of rainy weather. No one speaks of harsh winters unless they mean cold and snow. That eliminates the West Coast—and Hawaii, too.

"Wait," said Rubin, "how do you know it was from the United States? The letter is written in English, but it could be from Canada, Scotland, Australia. For that matter, almost any educated, non-Anglophobe foreigner can write in English these days."

Dunhill flushed. "Well, I did notice *something* about the envelope. It had an American stamp. I'm sure of it because I save foreign stamps for a friend and I automatically watch for them on all envelopes. Had there been a foreign stamp on the envelope I would have torn it off and discarded the rest. I think I would even have

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noticed a foreign postal-meter mark. —As you were saying, then, we can eliminate California, Oregon, Washington, and Hawaii. That leaves Alaska."

"I wouldn't have thought of Alaska," muttered Gonzalo.

"I would," said Drake, smiling. "I was born there."

"In any case," said Dunhill, "the only town in Alaska that even an Alaskan would think of as sizable is Anchorage. It's on the coast but not on the open ocean. It's on Cook Inlet. The inlet is to the west of Anchorage, however, and perhaps you can see the sun set into it. I didn't take chances. I called the Anchorage phone exchange and the post office. There's no Ludovic Broadbottom in the city. In fact, just to play it safe, I called Juneau and Sitka. Juneau is on another inlet farther south and Sitka has a population of less than ten thousand, but I called them. Nothing doing."

Halsted said thoughtfully, "If you're going to count cities on inlets, what about the East Coast? The ocean may be to the east, but there may be inlets to the west."

"I know," said Dunhill. "Florida has a long western coast and someone living on the shore in Tampa or Key West could watch the sun set on the water as it dives into the Gulf of Mexico. However, where would the harsh winters come in?

"There's a long peninsula that forms the eastern shore of Chesapeake Bay. The largest city on the western shore of that peninsula is Cambridge. It has a population of only about eleven or twelve thousand, but from it you can watch the sun set on the water since Chesapeake Bay is a broad stretch, so I called the town. I drew a blank there, too.

"Besides, the only harsh winters on the East Coast would be from Philadelphia northward—New England, particularly. Any city on the northeast coast, however, faces an ocean on the east or south. Even Provincetown, at the tip of Cape Cod, which could face west to the ocean, faces south. Falmouth, to be sure, can see the sun set into Buzzard's Bay, but it has only six thousand people and is *not* a sizable town. Absolutely no town that could conceivably be considered sizable has a western exposure to the ocean."

Gonzalo said, more to himself than to anyone else, "From Manhattan you can see the sun tumble into the Hudson."

"No, you can't," said Drake. "It squats down on New Jersey."

Halsted rubbed his high pinkish forehead and said, "You don't suppose your letter-writer got his directions twisted, do you? Not long ago an American delegate to the United Nations invited any

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nation that was dissatisfied with American hospitality to leave. He said he would be delighted to wave farewell to them as they sailed off into the sunset. He didn't bother to explain how one can sail into the sunset from New York."

Dunhill snorted loudly. "I remember that incident. He was simply using a metaphor stupidly. Besides, we're not talking about any member of the present administration. We're talking about an average American of, presumably, average intelligence."

"Besides," pointed out Avalon, "a man can mistake east and west, but if he's describing solar motions there's no way in which he can confuse sunset and sunrise. No, we need a sizable city with the ocean to the west and with a harsh winter. I confess I can't think of one that fills the bill."

Gonzalo said, "How about American islands that aren't part of states? Puerto Rico, Guam. They would still use American stamps, wouldn't they?"

"Yes, they would," said Dunhill, "and they're all tropical islands, too. —Believe me, gentlemen, I'm at the end of my rope."

Halsted said, "You don't think this whole thing might be a gag, do you? Maybe Ludovic Broadbottom is a made-up name and whoever it is deliberately sent you clues that lead nowhere. Maybe there was no return address on the envelope, either. Or a fake one."

Dunhill said, "Why should anyone bother? I'm a harmless person and my request is harmless, too. What would be the point of a practical joke of this nature?"

"The confirmed practical joker," said Avalon, "doesn't have to have a point—except on top of his head, of course."

Halsted said, "Do you have any friends who are practical jokers?"

"Not that I know of," said Dunhill. "I collect my friends with reasonable care."

Gonzalo said, "Maybe Henry has some idea." He turned in his seat and said, puzzled, "Where's Henry? He was here a moment ago, listening to us." He raised his voice. "Henry!"

Henry emerged from the cloakroom and said imperturbably, "I am here, gentlemen. I was merely engaged in a small task. —Mr. Dunhill, I have Mr. Ludovic Broadbottom on the telephone. He is anxious to speak to you."

Dunhill's eyes bulged. He said in a choked voice, "Mr.— Are you serious?"

"Quite," said Henry with a bland smile. "Perhaps you had better

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not delay. And I might advise you to offer a generous sum. He's moving next week and there will be no time to bargain."

Dunhill rose, appearing dazed, and vanished into the cloakroom toward the phone booth located there.

The Black Widowers sat in silence for a few moments and then Rubin said, "All right, Henry, what kind of magic did you use?"

Henry said, "No magic, Mr. Rubin. It was you who gave me the idea when you initiated the discussion of provincial attitudes toward coasts—the manner in which Americans on one coast sometimes forget, or ignore, the other.

"It seems to me that Americans on all three seacoasts—the Pacific, the Atlantic, and the Gulf, too, if you want to count that separately—tend altogether to ignore America's fourth coast, which is quite a long one, too."

"The fourth coast?" said Avalon, frowning.

"Of course," said Rubin, shaking his head in disgust.

"Yes, Mr. Rubin," said Henry, "I'm thinking of the Great Lakes. We don't think of it as a coastline, but Mr. Broadbottom didn't refer to it as that. He spoke of 'the shore,' and the Great Lakes certainly have a shore. We very commonly speak of a lake shore. And anyone living in a place on the shore of any one of the Great Lakes would perceive the same effect as would be obtained if one were overlooking an ocean. Those are large lakes, gentlemen.

"However, all the sizable cities on the lake shores have their lakes to the east, south, or north. We can even include the Canadian cities, if we wish. Duluth has Lake Superior on the east. Milwaukee and Chicago have Lake Michigan on the east. Gary has Lake Michigan on the north. Detroit has Lake St. Clair on the east—tiny by Great Lakes standards but large enough to give the effect of sunrise out of the water. Toledo has Lake Erie on the east. Cleveland and Erie have Lake Erie on the north. Hamilton has Lake Ontario on the east, while Toronto has that lake on the south and Rochester has it on the north.

"The only sizable city that looks west to a Great Lake is Buffalo, New York. It has Lake Erie to the west. From a proper location in Buffalo, one can see the sun set into Lake Erie—and Buffalo is notorious for its snowy winters. So I phoned Buffalo, obtained Mr. Broadbottom's number, called it, and he answered at once. He was quite concerned at not having heard from Mr. Dunhill. He is as anxious to sell as Mr. Dunhill is to—"

At this point, Dunhill emerged from the cloakroom, his face alight

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with joy. "All arranged," he said. "I will pay five hundred dollars plus shipping costs and I hope to have it in just a matter of days."

He reached for his wallet before a horrified Avalon could stop him. "Henry, you deserve a ten percent finder's fee for this. How did you do it?"

Henry raised his hand in a gentle gesture of rejection. "Mr. Dunhill," he said with quiet firmness, "as a member of the Black Widowers, I cannot accept a fee in connection with my club duties."

Dunhill hesitated, then replaced his wallet in his pocket. "But how did you do it, man?"

Henry said, "Just a matter of thinking of the Great Lakes as small oceans. It's not worth discussing. The important thing is that you'll have your books."

DETECTIVERSE

SURPRISE!

by SYLVIA TACKER

Henry the waiter was wise,
He solved crimes for those Black Widower guys.
They held him in awe,
Till they finally saw
He was really Poirot in disguise.

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"Here you go." Nicholas quickly read off three addresses in different parts of the city. Lewis wrote them down in a notebook.

"Got it?"

"It's gotten."

Brendan DuBois' first published story, "Dark Corridor," in the February issue conveyed a similar mood of lone, dark determination, but the stories are otherwise very different . . .

THREE DIFFERENT ASSIGNMENTS

by BRENDAN DuBOIS

The key to his life was preparation, Lewis thought one morning while getting ready for the day. Prepare and plan for any eventuality, any mishap, and nothing would go wrong. He loaded his 9-mm. pistol, and after putting it in his waist holster he picked up the two heavy black briefcases from the living-room closet and brought them into the bedroom, placing them carefully on the single bed.

From the top of the dresser he took a small leather-bound portrait holder and he gazed at it for a moment, lost in thoughts and memories. One of the two pictures was a faded black-and-white photo showing a young boy of about four or five sitting on a front stoop, wearing a Davy Crockett T-shirt. A young woman sat next to the boy, her arm protectively around his shoulder. She smiled bravely into the camera lens, but the boy's smile was a bit more defiant. There was a bandage on his forehead. That broken beer bottle from that kid in the top-floor apartment. Wolstein? Was that his name?

The other photo was even more faded, a newspaper clipping that had yellowed and torn. It was a photo of a burning tenement build-

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ing, fire trucks clustered about the sidewalk. He folded the portrait holder and put it inside his suitcoat. He had carried the two pictures for years.

Lewis looked into the mirror, touched the faded scar on his forehead, and scratched at his two-day-old beard. It itched but it was necessary for the day's work. Adjusting his suitcoat to cover the pistol, he picked up the two briefcases and left the apartment. In the basement garage, he placed the briefcases in two foam-padded receptacles in his car's trunk. After making a quick check of the other supplies, he slammed the lid down and smiled in satisfaction, fastening the special lock he had installed. A lot of precautions, but it was better than having some bopping kid break in and rip off its contents. Preparation was what made him one of the best in the country. He knew that and so did his employers.

Driving into the city, he stayed under the speed limit and obeyed every traffic law. He never brought attention to himself. Never. And especially today. This was the big one, the payoff. He was surprised that he wasn't nervous.

He took one of the inner-city exits from the highway and in a half hour his car was in a parking garage. He made his way to the subway, taking it only two stops before looking for a phone. In all the years working for his employers he had never used the same phone twice. Using a phone more than once formed a pattern, and a pattern could be spotted.

He came across a phone stall next to a coffee shop that was across the street from a stone cathedral. The church was encased in scaffolding and he looked at the workers while he dialed a number from memory. The phone rang once before being picked up.

"Yes," said a man's voice.

"This is Lewis. I'm calling for an assignment."

"Hold, please."

The phone went dead and then another man's voice came on. "This is Nicholas. Lewis?" There was a rustle of papers. "Here you go." And Nicholas quickly read off three addresses in different parts of the city. Lewis wrote them down in a notebook.

"Got it?"

"It's gotten."

"Hold the line. Someone wants to speak to you."

He waited for long seconds, watching the construction workers scamper along the metal framework. He had a feeling that if he watched any longer one of them would fall.

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"Lewis?"

"Yes?"

"This is Carl. How are you doing?"

"Fine, sir." He remembered when he first met Carl, many years ago, and how Carl had trained him until Lewis had learned so much so quickly he went freelance.

Now Carl was an old man, head of the company. He had not seen the man in person for years.

"You did very well last month," Carl said, his voice wheezing a bit. "Your divided check has been sent to your Bahamian bank, as always."

"Thank you, sir."

"You've always done a first-rate job. You've always done well by us, Lewis, even though I haven't seen you in such a long time."

He gripped the phone tighter and stared at one worker who wore a red hardhat. If I take my eyes away from him, he thought, he will no longer be protected and will fall.

"That's the way I do business, sir. I work alone and receive my jobs over the phone. It's the best way, I've found, since I've gone out on my own. It cuts down on the risks."

"Perhaps. But some of my younger associates, well, they sometimes are a bit hesitant in paying so much money to someone they've never met."

"My work is the best."

"That's true. And I tell my associates that they have nothing to worry about. So please be certain, Lewis, that I will always be able to say that."

"Yes, sir."

Carl hung up and Lewis walked away from the stall smiling. "Nothing to worry about." He glanced up at the cathedral. The construction worker stayed safe. He bent to his work.

An hour later, Lewis was on the other side of the city, in a decaying neighborhood that reminded him of his youth. Except he didn't remember it ever looking so helpless, so destroyed. Most of the buildings looked as if they had been struck by artillery fire. The sidewalks were crumbling and were piled high with trash, and many of the parked cars would never move from their spaces, their tires and engines gone. Several blocks before reaching this one, he had changed into a torn and greasy set of clothes and wrapped his shoes in newspaper.

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He held a bottle of red wine by its neck, sipping from it as he stumbled and swayed down the street. There wasn't much traffic and he easily spotted the six-story brick-and-wood building that was the target. A shooting gallery, it looked like, or a numbers center. A couple of husky men carrying baseball bats strolled up and down the sidewalk, but Lewis was ignored. He was part of the scenery. Other men, their hands jammed tight into their coat or pants pockets, stepped in and out of the building.

Lewis cut through an alley and was making his way to the rear of the building when two young men came out from behind a pile of broken bricks and plaster. They were slim and tall and wore warm-up jackets, jeans, and sneakers. Both had knives, and they laughed as they approached. One of them said something he couldn't understand, the accent was too thick. But he read what was going on in their eyes. When they were a few steps away, he reached in and pulled out his pistol. The sound of the hammer cocking made them freeze.

"Blow," he said, and they were gone, scampering behind the mounds of trash and rubble.

He put the pistol away and in another minute he was behind the building. Mounds of rotting trash were piled high near the doorway and he could feel someone watching him as he got closer, but he kept up his act, stumbling and tripping and snuffling, reaching under his coat and falling. He had done it many times before, in other neighborhoods. Under his coat, next to the pistol, were three square packages, thin and the size of a man's hand, which he had brought from the briefcases in the trunk of the car. He had spent a lot of time working on the packages so they would leave no trace after being used. They were a perfect balance of plastic, chemicals, and timer.

Later, when he stumbled away from the building, still putting on the act, he had left the three packages behind the building.

On the way to the car, shedding the newspapers from around his shoes and the wine bottle, he heard the scream of fire engines some distance away.

The next one was easier. Using an electric shaver in his car, he had gotten rid of the beard and was now back in his suitcoat and tie. He took a bus to one of the city's financial districts and he carried one of the briefcases, right out in plain sight.

He spent an hour in the building, roaming the corridors on the

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fourteenth and fifteenth floors, asking questions and directions from receptionists and secretaries, poking into janitor's closets and restrooms, checking unused cubicles. When he took the elevator back to the street, his briefcase was much lighter. It was empty.

He thought briefly of staying there on the sidewalk to see how much smoke would come out through the windows, but he had one more address to go and it would be a tough one. He always saved the tough ones for last.

The first neighborhood had seemed to breed trash, but the only trash in this neighborhood was an occasional gum wrapper on the perfectly paved street. Large Elizabethan-looking houses were set on grass lawns that rolled in perfect waves and it seemed that every car he saw was a Mercedes or a BMW. He had changed his clothes again before leaving downtown and he parked his car around the corner from the third target. He was carrying a clipboard, the proper I.D. for a utility worker, and wearing a light-blue hardhat when he approached the house. There was a high stone wall around it and a wrought-iron gate. A man with mirrored sunglasses was standing in a stone alcove just inside the gate.

"I'm here to read the electric meter," Lewis said, and the man with the mirrored sunglasses reached for a phone on the wall.

Ten minutes later, Lewis was still on the street side of the gate. The man with the sunglasses had been joined by a man wearing a three-piece suit.

"The meter was checked last week," the man with the suit said, frowning at Lewis.

"Like I said *before,*" Lewis replied, "the guy who read your meter last week just got canned. The bosses found out he's been half-tanked making the readings, so I've got to double-check his customers. Jeez, the dupe had some people's bills doubled."

The man with the suitcoat thought about it and slowly shook his head.

"Fine," Lewis said, starting to turn around. "I'll put in my log that you clowns wouldn't let me in. When your boss gets a bill that's tripled, he'll know who to blame."

He started to leave and stopped when he heard the gate being unlocked. "Just hold it, buddy," the second man said, still frowning. "Tony, call up to the house and send Fred down to follow this joker around. Tell him to make sure he's quick and doesn't lift any silver."

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"Thanks a whole lot," Lewis said as he went through the open gate. "You're all heart."

Fred looked like an ex-hockey player and stayed right with him, even when Lewis said the hookups didn't look right and he got into the cellar of the large house. But twice Lewis got Fred's attention away from him, once by saying he saw a rat in the cellar and once by mentioning a phone ringing. On both occasions Lewis left behind a package he had hidden underneath the papers on his clipboard.

Back in his car, he found he was sweaty, and his hands were shaking as he drove away. But still he kept his speed five miles under the limit. Getting out of something without raising suspicion was just as important as getting in.

His day's work was done. He had no urge to see how efficient this neighborhood's fire department was.

At his apartment, he ate a quick meal and watched the six o'clock news. Only one of his jobs made the news—the office building. No one was injured, but damages were in the millions.

He washed the dishes and then left, driving for more than an hour away from the city and the crowded suburbs until he was in a rural New England town. He had one more phonecall to make that night and he didn't want to make it close to the city. Carl and his company could do many things. Tracing a phonecall quickly was something Lewis wouldn't put past them.

At a gas station near an isolated corner of the town, miles away from any major highways, he pulled over and went into a phone-booth. Before making the call, he took out the leather-bound portrait holder and opened it up to look at the picture of the woman and the boy as he dialed the number he had dialed that morning. The same man answered. "Yes?"

"This is Lewis," he said, trying to keep his voice even. "Let me talk to Carl."

This time there was no long pause. Carl came on the phone instantly.

"Is this Lewis?" he asked, and his voice seemed flat.

"It is."

"Then I'm talking to a dead man, aren't I?"

Lewis couldn't help but smile. "I doubt it."

"You doubt it, hunh, you punk?" Carl asked, and now there was some emotion in his voice. "This morning you got three assignments to last you a month, and look what you do."

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Lewis said nothing. There was no traffic on the road and there were large trees all about him. Carl kept on talking, his voice wheezing in anger.

"You punk. What is it, I didn't pay you enough? Is that it? Are you working for someone else? Are you working for Andrade? Hunh? That must be it. Andrade hired you, didn't he? Well, let me tell you, kid, Andrade will cut you to the bone when he's tired of you."

"No one hired me. I'm still freelance. I did this on my own today."

Carl bellowed something incomprehensible and Lewis held the phone away from his ear for a moment. Then Carl wheezed some more and whispered, "You did this on your own?"

"That's right."

"You torched one of our better numbers houses, you destroyed millions in computer records, and you ruined my home, where my family is? You did this, you punk? My God, I am talking to a dead man. Tonight. This is your last night alive. Enjoy."

"You won't find me."

"The hell I won't, Lewis."

"That's not my real name. I got it off a tombstone in Vermont and I'm going to get a new one there tomorrow. I know everything about you and your family and your company, and I know exactly where to go to burn it all. You only know a fake name and a bank account number in the Caribbean. Your memory of me is fifteen years old, when we first met, when you taught me about torching. I look completely different now."

There was silence on the other end of the line, except for the sound of wheezing. It sounded like Carl was having a heart attack. Lewis continued.

"Does 1957 mean anything to you, Carl? In that year I was living with my mother in a flat on the Lower East Side. My dad had been dead for about a year and she was trying to raise me on her own. It was tough, but she was doing it. At least that's what I remember. I really don't have that many memories of her, because one night in 1957 our building was torched, and she didn't make it."

He looked at the picture of her sitting on the stoop, her arm around him. She had always been warm, he thought, warm and always there.

"So I knew I'd find those who torched the building and I'd punish them. It took many years, many years of getting to know you and your company and how it worked, Carl, knowing all along it had

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been you that torched our home. And now, well, now I'm going to burn you until you're nothing but dead ashes."

Carl started yelling again but Lewis hung up. He put the portrait holder back in his suitcoat, and as he walked to the car he smelled a slight tinge of something in the air, of someone far off burning wood or trash.

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a *NEW* Maynard Bullock story by

JAMES POWELL

"You're thinking invalid will, right?" the lawyer said. "So was I. But Milo came up with this sweetheart of a way around that problem. We bring a Mountie in to protect everybody's lives. And just to make things interesting, says Milo, let's write in another provision. Let's say that if the sole survivor is brought to justice for murder, then the Dooney millions go to Horseman's End, the Mountie retirement home."

"This must be some cruel joke from beyond the grave," said Bullock severely. "Nobody murders four people with a Mountie in the house . . ."

THE ORIGAMI MOOSE

by JAMES POWELL

The August night lay dark and sultry across the prosperous lawns and driveways of Toronto's Roseville District. The only light on Louis Riel Avenue came from the basement of a great, many-chimneyed and gabled house standing stark against a moonless sky. Old Milo Dooney, who could not sleep, was putting up wallboard to make a rec room in his basement.

Spare, white-haired, dressed in maroon-silk pajamas and a canvas carpenter's apron, Dooney divided his time between a large hand-held stapler with a resonant "kachung," a hefty tumbler of rye and water, and a small television set perched on a sawhorse. At that late hour the screen offered nothing more compelling than the annual telethon to benefit Horseman's End, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police retirement village up the Gatineau Valley.

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Multimillionaire Dooney made his first fortune before age thirty-five by developing a lavatory tile which could not be written upon, and his second twenty years later by developing a marker that would. So if he could not sleep it was not bad conscience. Dooney knew that when his time came he would leave the world no worse than he found it. What kept him awake was a desire to pass on his accumulated wealth intact. Unfortunately, he had been assured by Ferney, Ralston, and Jarvis that the crackerjack plan he'd hit on for choosing his sole heir would invalidate his will.

Dooney sipped his drink. On the screen, Commissioner MacNaughton, the telethon master of ceremonies, was saying, "Folks, the old clock on the wall says it's almost time for the ever-popular feature where we auction off the services of a genuine Mountie for one full working day for any licit purpose." He underlined "licit" with a finger wag.

"But first, how about another number from that swell bunch of guys, the Rideau Rockers?" The Commissioner led the applause to bring back the Mountie break-dancing team.

Stroking his withered chin thoughtfully, Dooney carried his drink upstairs and turned on the television set in the library. Then he picked up the phone and woke Ferney, Ralston, and Jarvis. The telethon auction was in full swing when he hung up to dial the number shown on the screen.

The next day, Dooney changed his will. Afterward, traveling alone in the elevator down from his lawyer's office, Dooney began to giggle. A polite chuckle followed, which quickly swelled into uncontrollable, liver-faced, teary, throw-back-the-head laughter with a bark to it. When the elevator doors slid open at street level, old Milo Dooney lay on the floor, dead from a burst blood vessel.

Acting Sergeant Maynard Bullock of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, dressed in full pontificals, jutted his chin indignantly at the taxi as it drove away into the Toronto twilight. By godfrey, once again the tip specified by Mountie regulations had been received with bad grace. Shaking his head at the age he lived in, Bullock turned from the curb and ran a knuckle through his moustache. As he tugged down the skirts of his tunic, he saw a shadow with a briefcase and a homburg coming down the walk from the Dooney mansion. Bullock met it at the gate in the tall iron fence.

"I'm Ferney, Ralston, and Jarvis, the late Mr. Dooney's lawyer," announced the crowded shadow. "I saw you pull up in the taxi. We

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got through the reading of the will in jig time. Before I head off, I'll put you in the picture."

Bullock wagged a finger. "The licit picture."

"You've got it," said the lawyer. "It reads like this. The five prospective heirs are in the house. If there's a sole survivor come the dawn, then he or she inherits the Dooney money. But if more than one makes it, then everything goes to the Widows and Orphans Fund of the Canadian Federation of Lavatory Workers."

Smiling at Bullock's frown, the lawyer said, "You're thinking mandate for murder, right? You're thinking invalid will, right? So was I. But Milo came up with this sweetheart of a way around that problem. We bring a Mountie in to protect everybody's lives. And just to make things interesting, says Milo, let's write in another provision. Let's say that if the sole survivor is brought to justice for murder, then the Dooney millions go to Horseman's End, the Mountie retirement home."

"This must be some cruel joke from beyond the grave," said Bullock severely. "Nobody murders four people with a Mountie in the house."

Ferney, Ralston, and Jarvis turned to go. "Better hustle then," he said. "You ain't up there yet. It could be wall-to-wall bodies by now."

Bullock reached the front door in long strides. It was opened by a tall woman with greying hair, sensible shoes, and sultry eyes. In answer to Bullock's worried question she said, "No, the killing hasn't started yet. We thought Milo would have wanted us to wait for you." With a warm smile, she slipped her arm around Bullock's and led him deeper into the house, which was decorated baronially with suits of armor and drafts.

"I'm Flora Pickens, nee Dooney," she said. "By the way, don't underestimate his nibs, Mr. Pickens. He's crazy as a bedbug, but he's Pickens-sly. He'll find a way to kill the others, count on that. Then he'll come looking for the wifey." She squeezed Bullock's arm. "That's why I'm sticking close to you. When he lurches through the door toward me, knife dripping with blood, veins pounding madly at the temples, you'll shout, 'Back, you hellhound!' When he keeps right on coming, you'll shoot him four times in the stomach. While he writhes in pain on the floor, I'll rush into your arms. But during our wild embrace, his nibs, drawing on some devilish store of strength, will start to crawl toward us, the knife between his teeth. Just in time, you'll see him. 'Take that and that, you murderous

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cur!' you'll snarl and shoot him twice between the eyes. He'll die right there at my feet.

"At which time," she said, laying her head on Bullock's shoulder, "you're going to have one handsome, wealthy, and generous widow lady on your hands. I'm talking Cabbagetown garconette, diamond pinkie ring, and a platinum watch so thin you could shave with it." She arched an eyebrow. "I'm talking me."

"A Mountie always gets his man. He never gets the girl, Mrs. Pickens," said Bullock, quoting an old adage on the Force.

They were passing a broad marble staircase. Mrs. Pickens said, "After you've met the others, you may want to freshen up. Your room's the third on the left at the top of the stairs." The eyebrow semaphore came again. "Right across from mine." As she spoke, a large young man and an amazon of a young woman came out into the hall and crossed toward an open door. They stopped when they saw Bullock. "Come and meet the twins," said Mrs. Pickens. "Meet Carl and Carla Dooney."

"Call me Skipper, sir," said Carl Dooney. He wore a three-piece suit, starched french cuffs, and a collar pin. The "sir" almost made up for the weak handshake.

Carla Dooney was something else again. Her hair was spiked and purple. Rusty spring scales of the kind Bullock remembered his aunt using to weigh fish hung from her earlobes. An imperfectly applied fake scar flapped against the dead white of her powdered cheek. She was dressed in the suit of red-flannel long johns that distinguishes the Canadian punkster from those of other climes. But in case there was any doubt of her nationality, she had slit a large Canadian flag and wore it like a serape. She also seemed to be using chloroform as a scent. She said, "We're heading for the kitchen. We thought coffee and cookies might go down nice before the fur flies."

Bullock chuckled tolerantly. "There'll be no fur flying with a Mountie here, Miss Dooney." As the twins disappeared through the dining-room door, Bullock remembered he hadn't eaten since supper and called after them hopefully, "Any chance for some of those big oatmeal jobbies?"

Before Mrs. Pickens could lead him across to the library, Bullock caught a glimpse of the dining-room table, a fine example of the Quints or Ten-on-the-Floor style of furniture. In the late Thirties, ten-legged tables, sofas, and benches had been all the rage in Canada. "It'll seat twenty-six fully extended," said Mrs. Pickens proudly.

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"And the mighty chandelier's early McTavish Potvin, from his iceberg-and-icicles period."

Taking Bullock by the arm again, she led him into the spacious book-lined library. "There's his nibs," she whispered, indicating a tweedy, elbow-patched man with an indoor look and a limp bowtie who was reading in a leather armchair beyond the fireplace. Then she introduced him to the balding little man with big ears and a worried mouth who was pacing back and forth across the oriental carpet. "My great uncle Clive Dooney, Milo's youngest brother and the twins' father."

Clive Dooney licked his lips. "A word with you in private if I may, Acting Sergeant," he said and resumed his erratic pacing. Bullock tried to fall in step but found the gait obscure.

"Try to miss those grey lozenges there that look like axeheads," explained Dooney. "And those blood-colored splotches." Soon the two were staggering across the carpet in unison. "You met the twins," said Dooney, "the fruit of my old loins. Carla's Accessories Editor for *Punk Sixteen* magazine. It's honest work and we Dooneys don't get much of that. Skipper's in the charity line, the Samaritans of Style. They're trying to spruce things up generally by distributing ties and pocket handkerchiefs to bums and derelicts. A helping hand from Savile Row to Skid Row, so to speak. Their mother Laverne was a saint. Did they tell you I killed her with an axe in a fit of madness?"

Bullock staggered the wrong way and it took him a moment to get back in step. Dooney continued, "That's why this present situation disturbs me. I know they wouldn't have released me from the Institution for the Criminally Insane if I wasn't cured. But what if the fit should come over me again? That's why I wanted to ask you to—"

"To keep a very, very close eye on you? Believe me, I intend to," Bullock assured him.

Dooney stopped to take one of Bullock's hands in both of his. "Bless you," he said moistly and went back to his pacing.

To keep the evening uneventful, Bullock decided he had better take a stronger hand in things. He strode across the room and introduced himself to Edgar Pickens. "What would you say, sir," he asked sternly, "if I told you your wife thinks you're crazy and out to kill her here tonight?"

"Can't blame her for that," said Pickens congenially. "My family has a history of insanity of the homicidal sort that goes all the way

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back to Mad Anthony Pickens, the Hanging Judge of Salem, Mass." He closed his book on a forefinger and gestured with it toward a portrait over the fireplace. A long cadaverous face in a judicial wig and a grin peered out through the thick varnish with wild, wolf eyes looking every bit like evil in aspic. "Mad Anthony fled up here with the Sons of Liberty and their tar and feathers hot on his heels."

"You mean you're United Empire Loyalist stock?" Bullock had always wished that he could number himself among the descendants of the Tory emigrees who came to Canada following the American Revolutionary War.

"The Dooneys, too," said Pickens. "Every hanging judge needs his hangman. They were partners in madness and worked the settlements of Upper Canada together, Mad Anthony in the lead and Daffy John Dooney following behind with his portable gallows and crazy barking laugh. Our two families have intermarried many times since those days. We have a saying that whenever a Pickens and a Dooney become kissing cousins, they do. But as for my being a homicidal maniac, my wife should talk. Family characteristics like that skip a generation."

"I'm afraid I fell off back there," said Bullock.

"My father was General Weston Pickens," explained Pickens.

"Jibbering Jimmy Pickens?" cried Bullock. "The twisted brain behind the Dieppe raid that cost so many fine Canadian lives in World War Two?"

"The same," admitted Pickens sadly. "Now, my wife's father, Bishop Scattergood Dooney, the philanthropist, perished trying to rescue children from a burning orphanage."

Bullock turned and looked across the room, where Mrs. Pickens, sensing she was being talked about, was trying to look sane. At that moment the twins returned and everybody made a move for the refreshments.

Later, when there was a lull in the conversation, Bullock waved the large shard of his fifth oatmeal cookie, which he'd purposely kept for gesturing, and said, "Folks, if you'll bear with me, please. Now we all know there's no way there's going to be a sole survivor, right? Not with a Mountie in the house. Still, I—"

"Hold on a sec," insisted Mrs. Pickens. "I thought my plan was pretty darn good." She repeated her scenario, making her husband wince with each bullet.

Clive Dooney brightened and put down his coffee cup. "Or, just

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for argument's sake, how about this? I'd kill everyone and then plead insanity. I sure know the drill. I wouldn't remember a thing, just like when I woke up in bed with a bloody axe and couldn't even tell the police where I'd hidden dear Laverne's various parts. After a few years I'd be back out of the asylum, cured and rich as Croesus."

"You know how I'd pull it off?" said Carla, brushing the flapping scar back out of her face. "I'd work out some slick plan so our Mountie friend here would do my killing for me."

"I'd offer Bullock a fifty-fifty split to look the other way," said Pickens.

All eyes turned to Skipper. The young man shot his cuffs and furrowed his brow. "I'd—I'd offer you seventy-five percent, sir," he stammered.

"Oh, groan, Skip," groaned Carla. "You're supposed to come up with your own idea."

"It *is* copycat, dear," said Mrs. Pickens. "But maybe you're right. Maybe fifty percent isn't enough to bribe a Mountie."

It was their exchange of thoughtful glances that got Bullock's goat. These people did actually think a Mountie could be bribed. A sudden anger clenched his teeth and he heard himself bark, "Well, how about this little number. How about I kill everybody? Then I say one of you murdered the others and I shot him or her trying to escape? That should be close enough to bringing the sole survivor to justice to satisfy the provisions of the will. Then the Dooney millions would go to Horseman's End, a modern constabulary retirement community where—where—" Bullock's rage chugged to a halt. In the deep silence that followed, the Pickenses and Dooneys looked at each other as if to say, "See, they're no better than we are."

Breathing deeply, Bullock removed his hat, laid it across his chest, and stared down at the floor. "Folks, sorry for flying off the handle there. We all know that Mounties were put here to protect people, not kill them. That's why, for safety's sake, I'm going to have to insist we spend the night together right here in this room."

This was greeted with "Oh, gag me with a snowshoe," from Carla and muted groans from the others.

But Bullock pressed his case. "Look, we could turn out the lights and tell ghost stories or offer a prize for the tallest tale. Hey, we could even watch the boob tube." Bullock held television in contempt. At home he could scoff at it for hours on end.

Fearing a general movement toward the door when none of these

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suggestions hit home, Bullock drew a dollar bill from his wallet and waved it in the air. "Folks, did you know you can actually kill a person with a dollar bill?"

He had their full attention at once. Thanking his lucky stars he'd let good old Mavis, his wife, drag him off to a demonstration of origami, the Eskimo martial art of paper-folding, Bullock told his listeners how back in their golden age the Eskimo had built a whole civilization around the art of folding sheets of dried seal skin. That was how they made their igloos and kayaks and the legendary and ingenious dogless dogsled which ran on whale oil.

As he spoke, Bullock was busy folding the dollar bill, starting from a horse base, one of the fundamental origami designs. When he reached the head, he switched to another basic design, the hat rack. As he armed the hat rack all around with jagged little tucks and folds, he said, "But when it came to self-defense, the Eskimo needed only one weapon!" Grabbing his creation by the hindquarters, he cut the air with it.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the Origami Moose, which can rip out a human throat in a single slash!" Their rapt attention made him wonder if perhaps this wasn't the wrong place and time for an Origami Moose demonstration. Clearing his throat, he quickly smoothed out the bill and stuffed it back into his wallet. Then, as if to neutralize what he'd just shown them, he said, "Strangely enough, the only denomination it works with is the one."

Carla got to her feet. "That's all very nice, but Carla's got to go to her room."

"I don't think it's wise for us to scatter, Miss Dooney," said Bullock.

"Listen," said Carla, "*Punk Sixteen*'s on the cutting edge of the verdigris revolution. Brass is back, accessorywise, because of the neat natural green it leaves on the skin. Tomorrow's my deadline for a column where I come out against the phony-baloneys who wear gold and use spray-on verdigris. And don't you try to stop me!" Tossing her head to set the scales hanging from her ears bobbing pertly, she strode out of the library.

Bullock didn't try to stop her, figuring she'd be safe enough provided the others stayed put. But when they began to drift toward the door, too, he herded them back with outstretched arms. "Come on, folks, let's chew the rag a bit," he urged, hating the un-Mountielike wheedle in his voice.

Grudgingly, they sat down again. Then Skipper, bless him, re-

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marked that he always thought origami was Japanese. With a glowing heart, Bullock launched forth on one of his favorite topics.

"It's just one more case of Canada standing back and letting foreigners pillage our rich cultural heritage, Skipper. Did you know the ukulele was invented in the Yukon? Did you know the Swiss Army knife is only a pale imitation of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police knife?" With a flourish, Bullock drew out his fat pocket knife and set about displaying its many features: the icepick, the bread knife, the folding sundial, the gauge for measuring snow depths, the mirror for flashing signals. He was showing how the handle was actually a cribbage board when from upstairs Carla screamed an urgent and heartfelt scream. Bullock dashed for the door, calling back over his shoulder, "You're deputized, Skipper! Keep everybody here!"

"Carla's room's the last door on the right, sir!" Skipper shouted back.

Bullock took the broad marble staircase three steps at a time, wondering as he went if Carla might have unexpectedly come face to face with a mirror. But just as he reached the top of the stairs the whole house was plunged into darkness. From the library he heard alarmed voices. Ahead of him pale moonlight outlined Carla's doorway at the end of the hall. Bullock drew his revolver and moved cautiously forward. Who knew what bloody horror might wait behind that black door? But the sound of many footsteps in the hall below told Bullock Skipper had let him down. There was no time to lose. Bullock aimed his shoulder and hurled himself across the hall. But what he thought was Carla's door turned out to be the narrow back staircase.

Bullock made it back down to the first floor in three bounces, landing on his feet just as they taught in tumbling classes at the Mountie Academy. (If you fell in a logging-camp fight they'd put the boots to you.) But he broke the golden rule by losing the grip on his pistol. As he fell through the darkness it trailed behind at the end of its white lanyard. His hard landing brought the revolver slamming down on the back of his head with equal force. He wasn't the first Mountie this had happened to. As the floor turned to porridge, he thought how lucky he was the blasted thing hadn't gone off. He plodded forward on sagging knees, then did a slow foxtrot with a suit of armor until it came apart in his arms. The darkness boiled around him.

When Bullock regained consciousness, a pale wash of light lay

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across the carpet at the other end of the dark hallway. His head spinning, he stood up among the rattling pieces of armor and made for it. When he reached the library door, he saw that the light came from a candle stub on a saucer sitting on the arm of Pickens' chair. The room seemed empty.

Cautiously but unsteadily, Bullock stepped inside. Suddenly the door slammed, an arm caught him around the neck from behind, and a rag heavy with chloroform was clamped over his nose. His rubber legs turned to water. The last thing he felt was a shoulder on his chest that pushed him back up against the door and held him there. The last thing he heard before oblivion swarmed over him was "kachung, kachung, kachung."

In this nightmare of his, Bullock found himself trapped inside a starched suit of long winter underwear. The sheer horror of the situation made him cry out for good old Mavis. He woke abruptly with the shout still ringing in his ears. He knew at once what had happened. He'd been stapled to the door by his uniform and boot tops. And it was a real good job. Try as he might, he couldn't move his arms and legs. He swelled his lungs, hoping to pop the tunic buttons and burst like a drab butterfly from the bright cocoon of his uniform. But the buttons held.

The door swung open until Bullock's toes touched the wall. Skipper's voice said, "And I say that shout came from here, Aunt Flora."

Bullock gave Skipper and Mrs. Pickens time to get through the door. Then he pushed off from the wall with his toes and swung back into the room. "You were ordered to keep everyone here, deputy," he growled, considering gruffness the best tack to take in his predicament.

They both jumped and turned. "Lights-out caused a stampede, sir," explained Skipper. "Dad remembered seeing a candle in the kitchen and Uncle Edgar had a flashlight upstairs in his suitcase."

"And silly me," said Mrs. Pickens, "I thought you'd arranged the business with the lights just so we could rendezvous in my room."

"What was I supposed to do?" asked Skipper. "People were charging off in all directions. Then I heard this big crash, like a body falling down the back stairs, so I figured it was time to check in for new instructions. So I found my way upstairs, figuring you'd be with Carla. As I passed your room, I heard a sound like stealthy sawing on metal. But when I tried the knob to see if it was locked, the sawing stopped. While I was waiting for it to start up again, Uncle

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Edgar came out of his room with the flashlight and headed downstairs the back way."

Here the lights came on again. Both Skipper and Mrs. Pickens seemed surprised to discover the Mountie's stapled condition. They both moved in closer. Averting his eyes as if not wanting to cause embarrassment, Skipper finished his report. "Then I heard somebody shout 'Mavis,' sir."

Mrs. Pickens smiled thoughtfully as she touched the staples along Bullock's sleeve with her fingertips. "Me, too," she said, putting her face close to his and fluttering her eyelashes. "So we came running—and here we are."

Before Bullock could order her to back off, there were quick footsteps on the staircase and the door burst open, slamming Bullock hard against the wall. "Dad's been murdered!" he heard Carla shout in an emotional voice. "He's up in his room with his throat torn out and a bloody dollar bill beside him on the floor!"

Bullock swung himself back into the room. "Unbutton my tunic, Skipper," he ordered firmly. "I've got a murder investigation on my hands." With the tunic open, he could free his arms and unstaple himself with the RCMP knife.

In mid-reach, Skipper stopped to ponder.

"Maybe you're right, Skipper," said Mrs. Pickens.

"Sure, he's right," agreed Carla. "A while back this guy was talking about killing everybody."

Afraid the wheedle would creep back in his voice if he insisted, Bullock said, "Then I'll run my investigation from here."

"We'd be happy to lug the body down here for your examination, sir," said Skipper.

"You don't move the body in a murder case," insisted Bullock. "All I want from you people are straight answers. Why did you scream earlier, Miss Dooney?"

Carla said, "At *Punk Sixteen* we give a primal scream to purify the spirit before we put a pen to paper."

"So you say, Miss Dooney," said Bullock grimly. "And have you been in your room all this time?"

"What with the will and everything, I sure wasn't running around in the dark," she said. "When the lights came back on, I started down here. When I passed Dad's door, there he was." Before Bullock could ask his next question, she answered it. "And, hey, who stole the chloroform bottle out of my room?"

Here the door burst open again. As he slammed into the wall

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Bullock heard Mrs. Pickens scream, "Look, it's his nibs—and his hands are dripping with blood!" Bullock swung himself back into view to find Edgar Pickens dabbing at the cut on his forehead with a bloody handkerchief.

"Hardly 'dripping,' " insisted Pickens, who seemed amused when the others explained why they'd left the Mountie stapled to the door. But he grew serious when Bullock informed him of Clive Dooney's death and he readily accounted for his time. "I walked into a beam down in the basement looking for the fuse box. Knocked myself out for a bit."

"Come on, Uncle Edgar," said Carla. "Let's put an icepack on that."

Pickens turned back in the doorway. "Say, anybody here have five ones for a five?" he asked.

Bullock's eyes narrowed. "Sure, help yourself," he said heartily. "My wallet's inside my tunic."

Pickens started for the buttons. Then he stopped and, with an admiring laugh at Bullock's shrewdness, he left the library, slamming the door behind him.

No one has known true pain until the door on which he has been stapled gets slammed. Bullock felt as if he'd been dropped naked into his uniform from a height of fifty feet. His bones rang, his teeth rattled, and every nerve in his body felt the lash. Several moments passed before he could manage a hoarse, "More deputy work coming your way, Skipper. Go watch those two on the sly. Don't let them out of your sight." Just in time he added, "And don't slam the door on your way out."

As soon as Skipper had left, Bullock adopted a conspiratorial tone. "Quick, now's our chance to get me out of this little pickle, Mrs. Pickens. I can't protect you from his nibs stapled to a door, right?"

"That's not the problem," said Mrs. Pickens, chewing her lip thoughtfully. "No, his nibs can't get off the dime, that's the problem. It's after midnight and he's still got two Dooneys to go. At this rate, it'll be after sunrise before he gets around to me." She paced for a bit, then seemed to make up her mind. "Time to stir up the pot," she said. Producing an amber-headed hatpin from somewhere, she leaned down and poked it into an electric outlet in the baseboard. There was a frazzle of blue sparks and the house went dark.

"Good godfrey, woman!" exclaimed Bullock.

"How dare you take that tone with me," she answered indignantly. "I have nothing else to say to you."

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Bullock spoke her name several times, with no answer. Was she sulking in the darkness or had she sneaked from the room? Bullock shook his head. By godfrey, how did he get himself into messes like this? He sagged deeper into his clothes and thought of better times ahead. He thought of Maynard Bullock, looking snappy in an RCMP Commissioner's navy-blue as he leaned back against the mantel of his office fireplace and smiled down into the smoking bowl of his briar. "Yes, young Fortescue," he heard himself saying, "I have often pondered the metaphysical question of the essence of Mountiehood."

"Sir?" asked the constable, wearing the aigrette of a Commissioner's aide-de-camp.

"Suppose you start stripping things away," explained Bullock. "Where do you come to the Mountie core? Is it the body of steel? The indomitable will? Or is it—" he raised an index finger "—or is it a rare quality of mind?"

"And that was why you tricked the murderer into stapling you to a door, sir?"

Bullock chuckled modestly. "Let's just say I found myself stapled to a door. Yet I was still able to deduce the murderer's identity. You see, madness, like other family traits, always skips a generation. This immediately eliminated Edgar Pickens and the twins. Mrs. Pickens' real mistake was to choose Clive Dooney as her first victim. For that pointed the finger of guilt directly at herself."

"But how did you escape from the door, Commissioner?" asked young Fortescue, his face bright with admiration.

Fortunately, the lights in the house came back on at precisely this moment.

With a wicked look, Mrs. Pickens, who was sitting in a chair with her hands in her lap, said, "I wonder what his nibs has the count up to now?"

Her smile drove Bullock to throw himself against the staples with all his might. He was still fighting to get free when Carla burst through the door. "Uncle Edgar's dead in his room!" she shouted. "His throat's torn out just like Dad's!"

"This I got to see!" cried Mrs. Pickens, leaping from her chair.

Here was Bullock's chance to take charge again. Though he knew it would hurt like the blazes, he pushed off from the wall hard and slammed the door. "You'd both better stay here. I've got some questions I'd like to ask."

"But don't you understand?" insisted Mrs. Pickens. "My husband, the man I wrongfully thought wanted to murder me, lies dead up-

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stairs. I must go to him." Striking a tragic pose with the back of one hand against her brow, she threw open the door and fled the room.

"Wait up, Aunt Flora!" called Carla. "It isn't good for you to be alone at a time like this!" Flag-serape fluttering proudly in her wake, Carla rushed out, slamming the door behind her.

His armpits raw, his marrow whimpering, Bullock hung there contemplating a career change. He was still pondering job possibilities when the door swung back open.

"Should I report in, sir?" asked Skipper. Though Bullock's grunt was short of enthusiastic, the young man did. "Aunt Flora's dead in her room, sir. Throat, bloody dollar, the whole nine yards."

"So's your Uncle Edgar, Skipper. I asked you to keep an eye on your Uncle Edgar, Skipper."

"Oh, I did, sir," he insisted. "When they left the kitchen, I followed them upstairs the back way. Uncle Edgar went into his room, saying he was going to lie down a bit, and Carla went into hers to get back to work. I only left my post keeping watch in the hall to go down and get the lights back on. But I ran out of matches and stumbled around a lot before I finally found the fuse box. When I got back upstairs, Aunt Flora's door was open and she was dead on the floor. Say, with Uncle Edgar out of the picture, too, it's down to Carla and me. That means Carla's the murderer."

"What say we get me loose and I arrest her?" suggested Bullock.

"And give everything to the Widows and Orphans Fund?" Skipper shook his head energetically. "Don't you see I'm only a heartbeat away from millions?" Tugging at his lower lip, the young man paced up and down in front of Bullock for a bit. Then he said, "Look, I'm next on her list, right? Couldn't I just take your pistol here and go shoot her down?" Skipper took up the weapon hanging on its lanyard at Bullock's knee and flourished it. "Wouldn't that be self-defense?"

"Not if you go looking for her, armed."

Skipper gave that some thought. "Okay, suppose I just walk around unarmed?" He stuffed his hands in his pockets and tried out a tuneless whistle. "You know, here's old Skipper out for a stroll—but when she tries to jump me, I kill her?"

"Sounds real good," said Bullock shrewdly. "But she's one tough customer. Better take my pocketknife. I'll never tell."

Patting Bullock on the arm, Skipper said, "Boy, you never give up, do you, sir?" He went out into the hall, remembering halfway into the slam not to do it.

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Bullock heard him on the stairs, humming tunelessly. Then he looked down and discovered Skipper's departure had started his pistol on a small pendulum swing. By godfrey!

By using what body english the staples allowed, Bullock was able to increase the swing until, after several tries, he could hook a finger in the trigger guard. But now came the tough part: Holding the pistol as far out as his stapled sleeve would allow and sighting as best he could across his legs, he would have to shoot off the head of the lower hinge pin. With sweat speckling his upper lip and a fine tremble creeping into his gun hand, Bullock aimed, closed his eyes, uttered a Mountie prayer, and snapped off three quick shots. He was relieved to find what fell to the floor was not his kneecap. With the pin out of the lower hinge, he could now use the door's weight to work the upper hinge out of the doorjamb wood.

Canting the door forward and tilting it slightly, he teetered out into the hallway with tiny quick footsteps and over to the foot of the staircase. At that very moment, Skipper and Carla could be locked in mortal combat up there. Bullock briefly considered hopping up a step at a time with his feet together. But each hop would be worse than a slammed door. No, there was only one way. Taking a deep breath, he pitched face forward onto the cold, sharp-edged steps. It was a good fall as falls into a marble staircase go.

Bullock immediately pushed off with his toes, using his palms and fingers to continue his upward creep. When he couldn't go any farther like this, he hooked his chin over the next step to keep what distance he'd won and bunched his toes for the next thrust. Making his painful, step-by-step progress up the staircase, he likened himself to the plucky Canadian salmon which, answering the call of primitive instinct, leaves its ocean home to scale the fast white waters and tumbling cataracts of British Columbia's fair rivers and streams, defying death in valiant leaps back to its spawning ground. And he thought of noble man himself, who had also forsaken the briny depths to inhabit the land, the air, the moon, and, next step, the stars!

At last Bullock reached the end of his long journey. With only one more step remaining, his heart filled with a pride only the salmon knows and he made the final lunge. By godfrey, he'd come home to spawn and die!

And die? Perhaps this sobering thought made him pull the punch of his final thrust, for instead of hooking over the top step his chin came down squarely on the edge. The bright astronomy blossoming

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behind his eyes uncurled his toes and fingers. Slowly, then with increasing speed, Mountie and door slid back down the staircase. Bullock's chin recorded each passing step with a terrible, dull "clop." It was clop-clop-clop, click-rattle-rattle, clop-clop-clop, click-rattle-rattle all the way down to the bottom.

Bullock lay motionless beneath the door, breathing heavily. Yes, that was it. He would sneak from the house and make another life for himself. Maybe he'd go live under a bandshell in Queen's Park, coming out just before dawn to nuzzle the dew and eat nuts and berries and tulip bulbs he'd dig up with a corner of the door. But mostly he'd think and become incredibly wise. On sunny days he'd lean the door up against the statue of Queen Victoria as Empress of India and the politicians from the Provincial Parliament Buildings and the students from the U. of T. would come and knock on his door to ask his advice, bringing as payment handfuls of nuts or berries to put in the clever nosebag he'd woven.

But he wouldn't give advice on the stock market or how to cheat on exams, not even if they brought him filberts. No, he'd only tell them about being straight with others and maintaining the right and how the strong must help the weak. So the years would pass, bleaching his uniform until it was as grey as a forgotten flag. His hair would grow long and he'd have a beard down to his belt. And the reputation of the Sage of Queen's Park Crescent would reach Ottawa. One day he would look up and good old Mavis would be standing there, looking as pretty as ever.

"Sage," she'd say, "seven years ago my husband, the only man I will ever love, disappeared without a trace and has now been declared legally dead. Now a gentleman friend is pressing me to remarry." (Bullock bet it would be what's-his-name, the druggist with the brush cut and the goo-goo eyes. He should've fixed that guy's clock a long time ago.) "Sage," Mavis would ask him, "tell me, please—is my husband still alive?"

"Woman," Bullock would answer severely, "the man you once loved no longer exists." His voice furred with emotion, he would add, "Go quickly and don't look back. Make a new life for yourself."

Bullock groaned from under the door. But not even for good old Mavis would he try to crawl back up those stairs. The clop-clop-clop, click-rattle-rattle still rang in his head. Click-rattle-rattle? Bullock's eyes snapped open. There, not two feet away, lay a gold tunic button.

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He craned his neck and saw another! The slide down the marble steps had sloughed off his buttons!

After a contorted struggle, Bullock worked one arm out of the stapled sleeve and undid his belt buckle. Then the RCMP knife did its work and he was free. He crawled out from under the door. When he'd rescued his tunic, he put it on and, gripping his pistol, he mounted the steps. By godfrey, he hoped the murderer would try to make a run for it!

The sign tacked to his bedroom door read: PRIVATE! KEEP OUT! THIS MEANS YOU! Muttering darkly, for he was in no mood to be ordered about, Bullock reached for the knob. Skipper stepped out of the shadows across the hall. "Please don't go in there, sir," he said. "It's not a pretty sight. Carla's gone the way of all the others. You'll be sorry for the rest of your life if you open that door."

"Still alive, eh, Skipper?" Bullock's words were a haughty reproach. He entered the room with a decisive stride. Too late he saw the straight razor attached to the inside of the door. His jaw dropped as he watched the severed end of the stout cord shoot across the room and snake down a large hole in the flooring. A tremendous crash sounded downstairs.

Skipper flicked his fingertips across his silk pocket handkerchief. "You've killed them, sir," he said. "They were all stapled to the dining-room table with their heads under the chandelier."

"Good godfrey," came Bullock's weak reply.

"I begged you not to open that door, sir," said Skipper. "I'm sure you'll testify to that."

"I'll testify you rigged up that damnable device of death, that's what I'll testify to!"

"That'd be perjury, sir. It was Carla rigged it up. Let's give credit where credit's due. When I followed them like you told me, I found her stapling Uncle Edgar to the dining-room table head-to-head with Dad, who wasn't dead after all. They were both gagged and unconscious and I saw the chloroform bottle. But I still couldn't figure out her game.

"Then I followed her up here and watched through the keyhole as she sawed at the bolt attaching the chandelier to the rafter under the floorboards. That's when I remembered what she said about letting you do the actual killing. So I let her rig things up here and get Aunt Flora. Then I gave her a taste of her own chloroform and stapled her to the place on the table she'd meant for me. But I'll lie

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about that part. You see, I'm not paid to tell the truth like Mounties are."

Bullock gave a deep, moist sigh.

"Come on," cajoled Skipper, taking Bullock by the arm and pulling him out of the room. "What's done's done," he said, leading Bullock down the hallway. "Let's go look at the carnage." On the stairs he added, "Sir, I intend to donate ten percent of my inheritance to Horseman's End in your name in appreciation for the help you've given me here tonight."

By working at it, Bullock managed to conjure up a vision of Mountie oldtimers, hands clasped behind their backs, skimming across the ice of the Acting Sergeant and Mrs. Maynard Bullock Memorial Indoor Skating Rink. Well, why not? Why not salvage some good from the wholesale slaughter?

But he had to shake his head in perplexity. Things weren't supposed to end this way. He was still shaking it when they reached the dining-room doorway.

"Oh, hell," said Skipper.

"By godfrey!" said Bullock, breaking into a big smile. The great chandelier had scored a bull's-eye on the center of the table. But no Pickens or Dooney had been under it when it hit. There they were, squirming against their staples and muttering through their gags, two on one side of the crystal wreckage and two on the other.

Bullock freed Edgar Pickens first. "There we were," said Pickens, "all staring up at the chandelier of doom, all struggling wildly this way and that. But suddenly the tabletop gave a hair and I remembered how it could be extended to seat twenty-six. So I quit struggling and started a calm, regular push. After a bit, the wifey there got the idea and joined in."

"That goes ditto for Carla and me," said Clive Dooney.

"Let me tell you, tonight sure taught me something about putting yourself in the other guy's place," said Carla.

Mrs. Pickens nodded as she swung her legs down from the table. "I'd say we've all just learned a lesson far more valuable than the lost millions. We've learned that if the Dooneys and the Pickenses work together there isn't anything they can't accomplish."

This was received with loud agreement on all sides. Even Skipper, watching from the sidelines with a hangdog look, rushed to join in the hugs and handshakes. Then Edgar Pickens exchanged glances with his wife and he turned to Dooney and said, "Uncle Clive, to get our new relationship off on an honest footing, I think we should

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tell you something. You didn't kill Aunt Laverne. She ran off with Chick the gardener."

"Quite out of the question," insisted Dooney hotly. "Chick used to wipe his nose on his sleeve. And he positively giggled when he cut down the hollyhocks along the garage. No, Edgar, I didn't mind Laverne's affair with you, but I'd have gone mad if I'd thought she left me for a creature like Chick."

Mrs. Pickens nodded. "That's why we put the bloody axe in your bed."

"You mean you cared enough to have me locked away in an asylum rather than see me go crazy?" The old man's eyes welled up with tears.

A startled Pickens said, "But if you knew about me and Laverne, then you know—"

"That Skipper and Carla are yours. Yes," said Dooney. "But I haven't loved them any less for that."

Skipper blinked. "Boy, that sure explains a bundle. I thought I was sane."

"I thought I dressed like this because I was in the forefront style-wise," said Carla. "I thought killing everybody for the inheritance was the most reasonable thing in the world. Now I see it was all madness."

Pickens laughed. "Not to worry. You have to be a little crazy to get by today. I—"

Bullock fired his pistol into the ceiling as much to cut the tommyrot as to get their attention. "Folks, let's not forget we're still talking attempted murder here."

"Pin the Chandelier on the Relative is a favorite parlor game among the old United Empire Loyalist families," insisted Mrs. Pickens.

"I'll swear to that," said Dooney.

Bullock knew he would. And the solid front of smiles put out by Mad Anthony Pickens' and Daffy John Dooney's posterity told Bullock he had no case. With a fervent wish that all the old United Empire Loyalist families would go back to the States where they came from, Bullock turned on his heels and marched out to collect his tunic buttons from around the marble staircase.

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THE JURY BOX
by ALLEN J. HUBIN

Mystery fiction for children and juveniles has abounded in this century. Early on the scene was the Stratemeyer syndicate, producing the Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys series for juveniles, series that continue to the present day. Nearly all of this fiction very reasonably features young protagonists, with whom the young readers can identify, but certainly not all mystery fiction featuring youngsters is intended for a young audience.

An example of the latter is *Beer and Skittles* (Thorndike Press, Thorndike, ME 04986; $15.95), third in a series by B. J. Morison about eleven-year-old Elizabeth Lamb Worthington. Based on *Skittles,* these are densely conversational tales of character and local culture, vividly and enjoyably portraying the prejudices and people of Maine. Here the setting is Northeast Harbor, home to retired General Alison, a cousin of Elizabeth Lamb. She's visiting there this August of 1972, along with Persis Halstead, also eleven and a cousin and notably outspoken. The first death, that of an unknown young man on the general's beach, could be accidental. So, at first glance, could the second. Who among all the seemingly gentle people could be hatching a plot worth killing for?

Tucker Halleran's second investigation for Cam MacCardle is *Sudden Death* (St. Martin's, $14.95). This is an intense and involving tale, much stronger than Halleran's first. MacCardle was idled from marriage and pro football by unpleasant circumstance. But he's now found Carole, a good true love, and occasional private investigating keeps him active. Here he's asked to look into the killing of a young lawyer. Somewhere in Tom Horton's case files, thinks Cam, lie the roots of his murder. And from out of those cases, somewhere, comes yet more killing. Fine storytelling.

Julie Smith, whose first two mystery novels were about a female Jewish lawyer named Rebecca Schwartz, now turns to a dropped-out journalist named Paul McDonald in *True-Life Adventure* (Mysterious Press, $15.95). McDonald, who is the only unpublished American mystery-writer with that last name, ghostwrites investigative reports for a sleazy San Francisco private eye. The latter has the bad manners to drop dead in McDonald's house—of poison, it develops. Something deadly resides in the investigator's last case, a child-custody squabble involving a TV personality and her husband, a Nobel-winning scientist. Said deadliness extends to McDonald, a rather superficial chap who seems ill equipped to cope. Good thing he has friends.

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The Saint Valentine's Day Murders by Ruth Dudley Edwards (St. Martin's, $12.95) is an amusing, satiric, and literate narrative, the second appearance for Robert Amiss. Amiss is a British civil servant, "seconded" to various organizations where his talents are needed. Here he's assigned to British Conservation Corporation's purchasing department, a hideously overstaffed dumping ground for incompetents which is preoccupied with its own survival, politics, and the proliferation of paperwork. Practical jokes give way to mass murder, with Amiss right in the middle of it. Edwards dissects police and corporation with microbiological skill, and the result is a joy to behold.

The latest Modesty Blaise affair by Peter O'Donnell to appear here (1978 in England) is *Dragon's Claw* (Mysterious Press, $15.95). Modesty and her colleague Willie Garvin, the villains, and the plot are of course preposterous, along the lines of the James Bond fantasies, making this a "prepostery," if you will. But the telling is intense, highly engaging, and, with disbelief securely suspended, immensely satisfying. Sailing alone in the Tasman Sea, Modesty fishes out a famous painter, Luke Fletcher, thought drowned weeks before and thousands of miles away. He has escaped from the attentions of Beauregard Browne and his psychopathic gunslinger, The Reverend Uriah Crisp, and these ungodly turn their kind attentions to Modesty and Willie. Unaware of these sinister interests, Modesty and Willie befriend the artist. If Fletcher ever regains his memory of what happened on Dragon's Claw, blood will run.

Susan Dunlap brings back meter reader/sleuth Vejay Haskell in *The Bohemian Connection* (St. Martin's, $12.95). Vejay fled San Francisco and a messy divorce for the Russian River resort area and the town of Henderson, where she works for the local power company touring the countryside recording electricity consumption. She has the usual predisposition of amateur detectives: stumbling over corpses, to the dismay of lawmen. Here she's asked to look for a missing housewife and finds instead bodies and connections to a long-missing boyfriend and to the local underworld of drugs and purchased sex. This is a well done story, a pleasurable portrayal of a Northern California town under tourist attack and attended by a killer.

Alistair MacLean's work falls largely on the fringes of our genre. He produces adventure fiction, war novels, and occasionally dips fully into mystery fiction with espionage stories. His publishers think of him as a mainstream writer, though his narratives are always full of high suspense. The latest, *San Andreas* (Doubleday, $16.95), is set on a hospital ship in the Norwegian Sea in the dead of winter during WWII. The ship is painted white, with red crosses; it is thus to be immune from attack. Aboard are doctors, nurses, sailors, sick and wounded, and a saboteur. Power fails aboard ship, and out of the dawn darkness, toward an *Andreas* silhouetted

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against the sunrise, comes a German bomber. MacLean makes a compelling experience of this—the ship, seriously damaged and tossed in storm-filled seas, hunted by planes and U-boats, comes alive with its men. The search to identify those placed aboard by the Nazis, evasion, even counterattack of the hunters, the "why" of all this, the character and actions of the heroic bosun, Archie McKinnon, produce an exhilarating read.

The current tale of Irwin Maurice Fletcher by Gregory Mcdonald, *Fletch Won* (Warner, $14.95), takes us back to Fletch's beginnings as a reporter in L.A. This is not as rich and comic a tale as the best in the series, but it has a number of nicely amusing touches. Fletch is here in trouble with everyone: the editor of the *News-Tribune*, who hasn't yet found Fletch an assignment he can't screw up in colorful fashion; Biff Wilson, crime reporter, who finds Fletch bothersome competition in solving the murder of a lawyer who uncharacteristically wished to give five million dollars to a museum; the cops, who would just as soon lock Fletch in the slammer forever for resembling a stickup artist or for almost any manufactured reason; Barbara, whom he plans to marry on Saturday and who might take amiss Fletch's investigation of a health club-cum-bordello.

I've space only to touch on some of the rewarding current abundance of softcover mystery fiction. Look at least for these. From Quill come the three 1930s novels of Raoul Whitfield, *The Virgin Kills*, *Green Ice*, and *Death in a Bowl* ($3.95 each). From Avon, two early Antony Maitland novels by Sara Woods, *Malice Domestic* and *Bloody Instructions* ($2.95 each). From Academy Chicago, three by H. R. F. Keating: *Inspector Ghote Breaks an Egg*, *Inspector Ghote Caught in Meshes*, and *Inspector Ghote Hunts the Peacock* ($4.95 each). From Dell, a late and an early Charles Paris mystery by Simon Brett, *Not Dead, Only Resting* and *Cast, in Order of Disappearance* ($3.50 each). From Signet, a tale of Inspector Pascoe and Superintendent Dalziel in its first U.S. appearance: *A Clubbable Woman* by Reginald Hill ($2.95). From Penguin, a sampling of Nineteenth Century crime fiction selected by Graham and Hugh Greene, *Victorian Villainies* ($7.95), a mid-1970's Michael Innes novel about Charles Honeybath, *The Mysterious Commission* ($3.50), and the Edgar-winner for 1984, Ross Thomas' *Briarpatch* ($3.95). From Carroll & Graf, a pair of mid-'50s novels about Chicago private eye "Mac" by Thomas B. Dewey, *The Brave, Bad Girls* and *The Mean Streets*, two 1950s Tommy Hambledon espionage yarns by Manning Coles, *No Entry* and *Night Train to Paris*, A. E. W. Mason's *The House in Lordship Lane*, and *The Emperor's Snuff-Box* by John Dickson Carr ($3.50 each).

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DETECTIVERSE

THE LOWEST SHAME

by BETTY JEAN ARCHER

On a snow-blown hill where the wind is chill,
There's a cabin damp and drear
With a battered door and a cold bare floor
And the stench of beans and beer.

The man, Glen, inside has a sin to hide
So he shuns the light of day
But he trails to town when the sun goes down
Each night in a half dazed way.

For Glen has a vice that claimed as its price
His job, his home, and his kin
Yet his eyes burn bright as he shields from sight
His tokens of deep-down sin.

He rounds up a few who are fallen, too,
And are drawn by guilt and shame
Together to share the burden they bear—
Their lust for an age-old game.

One night Glen, when he gathered in the men,
Saw a stranger in their midst—
He looked like a sport, a real he-man sort,
With a cash-roll in his fist.

Glen sank to his knees, most eager to please
The men who crowded around—
He breathed a command to the dice in his hand
And rolled them across the ground.

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Now our man called Glen threw once again
With a fiver on the shot.
The dice came true and again he threw—
Our man was rolling hot.

But his luck passed on to a man named John
And the dice were his to use—
Until the stranger's call surpassed them all
And it seemed he could not lose.

The men watched him with their faces grim
As he pulled each pot away—
Then Glen's eyes looked sly as he caught on why
Each dice had a funny lay.

He snaked out his right and grabbed them tight
And he turned for all to see—
With his hand like a cup, he tossed them up
And tapped them against his knee.

He nodded his head at a man called Ed
Who had bounded to his feet.
As the stranger spun, Ed pulled his gun
And pointed him down the street.

While the men milled about, a shot rang out—
They paused for a breathless wait,
All anxious for Ed to empty his lead
And finish that stranger's fate.

Oh, a man may roam and lose his home,
May sleep in the dank and the cold
And have no pal or homespun gal
But he still has his honor to hold—

For to cheat at dice is more than a vice,
It's the lowest form of shame.
A man like that should be laid out flat
And let the rest get on with the game.

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a *NEW* short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

For someone so young, Pixie Hemmingford had plenty of sensitivity. "Were you close to her?"

"Not at the end I wasn't," Murphy said. He was remembering something Jessica Parr had told him in that solitary letter. "If I had been, maybe she'd still be alive . . ."

THE ROAD TO STE. AGATHE

by WILLIAM BANKIER

The winos were dancing in Soho Square when Murphy came out of the building. The summer weather put him in mind of similar evenings back in Montreal when he would cover his typewriter and head on out of the ad agency for a night on the tiles with Charlie McIntosh. After nearly a year in London, he still missed his friends. But he couldn't complain because the money was good. So good, in fact, that Milt Murphy sometimes wondered why Tiller, who had never liked him, gave him this cushy transfer in the first place.

Pixie Hemmingford detached herself from a display of punks on the lawn inside the square and floated across the road to stand at Murphy's side. She wore two rings in either ear and her bleached hair was an inch long all over. Despite such efforts to turn herself into a cartoon, the girl would always be Somerset gentry. She looked at Murphy with curiosity, still trying after months of close contact to figure out this stranger dressed in a suit, shirt, and tie.

"Pubs are open," she said.

"Yeah, okay."

"Can I bring Mindy?" Mindy was another of the Chelsea exhibitionists, quite like Pixie but minus the education.

"No."

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"All right, then."

She took hold of Murphy's belt buckle and led him away in the direction of The Horn.

It was Murphy's favorite pub because the juke box carried, in addition to the top forty, a selection of jazz recordings. Waiting at the bar for their drinks, he handed some coins to Pixie. "Feed the machine like a good girl," he said. "And you know what I like."

A few minutes later, he was sitting beside his cute companion at a table splashed with sunlight filtered through stained glass, drinking imported Budweiser and listening to the Charlie Barnet orchestra playing "Cherokee."

Pixie was watching his face avidly as if she had fed him homemade cake. When he let his eyes focus on her warmly, she put her cheek close to be kissed.

After a while, as they were starting on the second drink, she said, "My parents are after me to come home for a fortnight."

"Wells must be a beautiful place in summer."

"Want to come?"

His hesitation was enough to kill the invitation. "Great idea," Murphy said. "I'll have to check the old calendar."

"I only asked because Dad said he'd like to meet my Canadian friend. Don't look like that, it's because he took his flight training in Ontario during the war. You'd hate it, all those boring Air Force stories."

Another record began to play. Strings laid down a succession of chords and then an alto saxophone eased in with a full-throated blues. The tone was unmistakable—Murphy thought of it as restrained urgency—and each phrase of the music asked a question.

"That has to be Garth Parr," he said.

"Right first time," Pixie confirmed. "I picked it for the title—'Requiem for Jessica.' " His change of expression alarmed her. "What have I said?"

"I'm not sure."

After he joined the Tiller-Caldwell Ad Agency, Murphy had worked for several months down the corridor from Jessica Parr without thinking much about her last name. As soon as somebody mentioned that she was the wife of Garth Parr, famous soloist with a couple of name bands and then with his own trio, it all fell into place. She looked Hollywood, with a showgirl build that could not be disguised by jeans and a bulky sweater, eastern eyes, and smooth black hair done in a heavy braid. Her potent female magic might

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have caused Murphy to flee in confusion had it not been for her sense of humor. They would sit in some meeting with a boring client and after a few statements of spectacular density, she would catch Milt's eye and her lips would move just a little and he would be left thinking how great it was to be alive. The worst thing about being shifted to London was saying goodbye to Jessica. The only letter she had written him in reply to a string of his messages was now almost in fragments from being read again and again.

"I have to make a phonecall," Murphy said to Pixie. "Buy us a round," he told her as he left the table. "Spend some of your remittance money."

He had to telephone three places before he got the information he was after. Then he returned to the table with a long face. Pixie noted his expression and began defending herself. "It costs a lot to do my hair this way. I know Daddy pays me to stay in London and it isn't fair for you to pick up all of the—"

"I just found out a terrible thing," Murphy said. "A friend of mine died." The bloke in the record library at Capital Radio had been the one to tell him. "Requiem for Jessica" was Garth Parr's new single, dedicated to his late wife. How did she die? There was something about it in *Downbeat*, a traffic accident in Montreal.

For someone so young, Pixie Hemmingford had plenty of sensitivity. "Were you close to her?"

"Not at the end I wasn't," he said. He was remembering something she had told him in that solitary letter. "If I had been, maybe she'd still be alive."

"You can't change the past."

"That's true." Murphy was calculating time owed him for holidays and the latest cut-rate airplane fare to Montreal. "But maybe I can have an influence on somebody's future."

"You expect me to read this?" Charlie McIntosh complained. Murphy had spread the tattered letter on his drawing board like a fragment from a Dead Sea Scroll. Compounding the drama, the London visitor had first closed the office door, something McIntosh never did. Outside, workaday Montreal was shutting up shop in the glass towers and bartenders were beginning to serve two drinks for the price of one.

"This is the part." Murphy stabbed a finger across his friend's shoulder. Despite the anger he still felt because of Jess's death, he was loving being back in Charlie's disorganized presence. Rubbish

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dropped before Murphy went away lay untouched like exhibits in a museum. The wall behind his chair was streaked with tempera from the constant swing of the artist's brush as he dipped it and flung away the excess.

Murphy read aloud from the letter. "—and my mind is made up. I *will* see Garth again and what happens will happen. As for Jeremy, he can take me as I am—or as I will be."

Charlie watched the limp paper refold itself in Murphy's hands and vanish inside his wallet. "She was talking about Jeremy Tiller."

"Who else? They were dating before I went away."

"What was it with you and her? I could never figure that arrangement out."

"I told you it was friendship. Brother and sister."

"That gorgeous woman—and you sharing her apartment?"

"We talked and we laughed, Charlie. You didn't know her."

The office door swung open without warning. The president of Tiller-Caldwell Advertising came into the room. "They told me you'd flown in, Milt," he said. "What a nice surprise. Come and tell me about London."

Jeremy Tiller's success was based largely on that intangible quality known as nationality. In Montreal, among hustling French-Canadians and transplanted hicks from Ontario and Manitoba, the Englishman stood out like a cross between Sir Walter Raleigh and Laurence Olivier. He was, in fact, plain Jerry Tiller from Hackney, and had he stayed in London his neutral accent, painstakingly acquired to disguise a cockney chirp, would have fooled nobody. So he worked hard in advertising, where his quick brain was appreciated. By the time he was twenty-eight, he had joined a multi-national company with an office in Montreal. At thirty-two, he wangled a transfer to that branch of the firm and began establishing a good reputation there, especially with one client in particular. Three years later, he went out on his own, taking that client and his three-million-dollar account with him.

On his own? Well, as good as. Tiller climbed aboard the floundering Caldwell Agency just before it would have gone down with all hands, baled it out, and set it on course for success. Today, Tiller-Caldwell was one of Canada's top ten ad firms. It even maintained a branch office in England to service the European needs of Canadian clients.

"I can tell you all about London in a few words," Murphy responded sharply to his boss's question. "It's a lonely place."

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"Nobody I know ever called London lonely."

"It's that way for me since I heard of Jess's death."

It was not what Tiller had expected to hear. "That's ancient history. Sad, but the lady is long gone."

"I feel as if she's still here. Trying to tell me something."

Charlie McIntosh had begun shifting his feet as if he was in a snare and it was closing. "I'm going over to the Boiler Room for a drink. Anybody interested?"

"See you there in half an hour," Murphy said. "The boss wants a word."

They strode through empty corridors to Tiller's office at the other corner of the building, past cells vacated by well paid slaves. The tall Londoner was in the lead and marching like a guardsman on the Mall. Tiller told anyone who would listen that he had done his two years' National Service in a para regiment. Murphy could believe him, seeing the swing of the arm and hearing the way the boot heel came down.

Inside the corner office, he accepted a glass of gin and tonic and sat facing the view of Mt. Royal—trees, clouds, sky, the Cross constructed of flimsy-looking girders. Tiller sat behind the desk, his back to the panorama. He enjoyed looking into the faces of visitors and imagining they were impressed with him. "Something is stuck in your throat, Milt. Spit it out."

"Jessica's death. I only heard about it accidentally a couple of weeks ago. Since then, I've talked to people, read back issues of newspapers. She was with you on the autoroute driving north. Late at night, not much traffic. Your car broke down and you pulled onto the shoulder."

Tiller was nodding, his eyes blank. "I told her to stay in the car but she got out. She'd been drinking some, we both had. She wandered onto the edge of the highway. I had my head under the hood. When I looked up and saw headlights approaching, I called for her to get back. Anyway, there was a plane flying over and she was looking up at it. She didn't hear me. The car must have been doing seventy. She was carried two hundred yards—"

"And the hit-run driver was never found."

"It all happened so fast."

In his mind's eye, Murphy observed the death scene. Tiller's description had the ring of simple truth. But only part of the truth. Something important was not being said. "What did the police do?"

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"As much as they could. I remember a detective-sergeant named Lacombe. You think we're busy in the ad business, you've no idea the case-load those blokes have to handle." Tiller smiled and shrugged. "Lacombe seemed more interested in baseball. When he learned our brewery client sponsors the Expos on TV you should have seen the hunger in his eyes. I handed him a couple of tickets and he nearly put his arms around me."

A tall, heavy-set man in a well pressed blue suit appeared in the doorway, hesitated, and began to back away. "Sorry—" Sparse grey hair was brushed neatly across his shiny scalp. Watery blue eyes apologized for a hideous veined nose.

"Come in, Vince. It's Milt Murphy—you remember him. Pour yourself a drink." Vince Caldwell, the senior silent partner, was so out of it as far as the running of the agency was concerned that he needed constant help with names. "Murphy was one of the young pistols in the creative department. There was an opening in the London office and I decided the experience would broaden him. He's home for a holiday."

Caldwell turned from the drinks table with a glass of straight whiskey in his hand. A fragment of fact had penetrated his confusion. "Aren't you the one who was living with Miss Parr?"

"That sounds like more than it was," Murphy said. "All I did was share her apartment." He glanced at Tiller. "Some people found the relationship hard to understand."

Tiller said ponderously, "Don't feel guilty. What happened to Jessica had nothing to do with you. Try to take that on board."

"Obviously, I'm in no position to say what really happened—" Murphy finished his drink, stood up, and moved to the doorway "—but I have this hunch that she was taken out. I don't know why, but I have to try and find out."

When the visiting copywriter was gone, Caldwell said, "He worries me."

"Everything worries you," Tiller told him. "Agony is your middle name."

Across the road in the Boiler Room, Charlie McIntosh used his fingertip to trace connections between beer spills on the bar. "What if you're right?" he said to Murphy, who had two full glasses in front of him and was trying to catch up. "If Jess was murdered, and if Tiller had something to do with it, and you keep pressing—what happens to you?"

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"I want to talk to Garth Parr."

"Her husband."

"I want to hear what he has to say."

"California, here I come?" McIntosh inquired.

"They've invented this thing called the telephone." The bartender provided one. "You'd be amazed how helpful it is."

The L.A. operator did everything but hum Parr's famous closing chorus of "Moonlight in Vermont." No problem, the musician had a number in West Hollywood. In less than two minutes, Murphy was listening to Parr's answering tape, which cut off suddenly as Garth himself picked up the receiver.

"I'm calling from Montreal. Sorry to bother you—I *am* a fan of yours, but that isn't what I want to talk about. I was a friend of Jessica's and I—"

"Who is this?"

"You don't know me. My name is Milt Murphy."

"I know *of* you, man. Jess spoke about you last time she came down here. She thought you were something special."

Murphy felt bastions of reserve crumbling inside him. He had prepared himself to confront a stranger, perhaps one who would be hostile. Suddenly he was talking to somebody he had known forever. He responded by raving for a couple of minutes about Garth Parr's music. He named old sides from the big-band days, referred to the famous ten-minute solo on "Mountain Greenery" recorded with Jazz at the Phil, and ended up by mentioning the new release, "Requiem for Jessica," that had informed him of the sad event north of Montreal. "I know I shouldn't stir up the ashes," he concluded, "but I can't accept her death as an accident."

"What do you mean?"

"I think she was killed."

After a silence, Parr said, "Have you told the police?"

"No, but I intend to. I have the name of the investigating officer. Lacombe."

"Why would anybody want to kill Jessica?"

"I don't know that, either," Murphy took a breath. "I hoped you might be able to tell me."

"She was her own person. That was the clue to understanding Jessica. She decided how she was going to conduct her life, then she went ahead and made the moves. And she didn't always tell me what she had in mind."

"I knew that about her. With me, it didn't matter."

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"With me, it did," Parr said. "Which is probably why we split."

"And yet she came to see you. She wrote me a letter after the company sent me to London. In it she said, 'I *will* see Garth again and what happens will happen.' Those are her exact words."

"And she did. She flew in unannounced, which was vintage Jessica. Stayed with me at the apartment." For the first time, the self-assured, East Coast voice lost its momentum. "We were happy," Parr said at last. "For a few days, I figured we might be going to make it again. A month later, she seemed to change. Not that we fought, or that she got unhappy. She just packed her bag and caught a plane."

Murphy and McIntosh left the bar at ten o'clock. They went into the parking lot and found Charlie's car. "You're still welcome to change your mind and stay at my place," the artist said.

Murphy turned down the invitation. "Drive me to the police station." He glanced at the bar mat upon which he had scribbled the address given to him by the cop who answered the telephone. "It's on Maisonneuve, corner of Fort. I want to talk to Lacombe while he's on duty. And while I'm drunk enough not to be afraid."

"We don't play hunches," Sergeant Lacombe said. "You come in here and say it wasn't hit-and-run, it was murder. Where's the evidence?"

A window in the office was propped open on a stick. Laughter drifted up and in from a sidewalk café across the street. Murphy felt himself part of the night and related to that carousing crowd. "Isn't that your job?"

The detective had gone to the trouble of digging out the file because there was something he liked about this tipsy anglo who came in off the street and wasn't afraid to speak a bit of French badly. Now he closed its cover and tossed the file aside. "You think your boss had something against her," he said. "You think her husband in California may be involved. Hunches."

"I'm not going back to London until I find out what really happened."

"If you interfere with those people, they can report you. Then the police *will* get involved."

"Ca, c'est mon problème."

"Third of July," Lacombe said. "That's when she was killed. It's almost a year, monsieur—time to let go."

Murphy looked surprised. "I never heard the exact date," he said.

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"July third is my birthday." It was time to go and leave the detective alone. He got to his feet.

"We take hit-run seriously," Lacombe said. "The front end of the car must have been damaged. It never showed up in any repair shop, not that we could trace. It may still be around in somebody's garage." He made a note on a pad. "Tomorrow I'll put out a reminder, keep people looking."

"Thanks for that," Murphy said.

"It isn't much."

Leaving the office, Murphy spotted a baseball glove on a shelf. It was cupped around an ancient baseball. He took the ball from the leather pocket and saw that it bore a bruise from contact with a bat. And there was a faded signature on it. He squinted at it, made out the name. "Jackie Robinson?"

Lacombe grinned. "I caught that ball in the bleachers at the old Delorimier Stadium. Got him to sign it after the game. Jackie Robinson was playing for the Royals in the International League. Before your time."

"Like hell. I was following baseball then." Murphy replaced ball and glove carefully on the shelf. "First black player to be signed by a major-league organization," he said. "The Dodgers knew when to play a hunch."

The furnished room Murphy had rented on lower Drummond Street was not far away. He stood outside the police station allowing hungry taxi drivers to cruise past him along Maisonneuve without so much as a nod from him. Let the bastards starve—when it rained, they all went home. Or so he used to believe.

It was the wrong time to go to bed. It wanted to get much earlier. They were falling into and out of the bar across the street, playing musical tables behind the lattice barrier under a fake canopy of striped aluminum. Murphy crossed the road, went inside, and sat at the bar. A pretty girl from the Gaspé served him a beer. A prettier one eased onto the stool beside him with a hiss of nylon and asked him, through a haze of musk, if he wanted some company. Murphy decided to save the money and she left him to savor her contempt.

A tall, familiar shape drifted past, halted, leaned toward him. "We meet again."

"Mr. Caldwell! Sit down, have a drink."

"I won't say no." The suit, the shirt collar, the tie, the neatly brushed, sparse hair—all had survived these many hours. Only the

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agency partner's eyes revealed the extent of his alcohol intake—they were set in aspic. "You must call me Vince. I didn't realize you're a loner."

"In London I'm not. I have a friend there by the name of Pixie Hemmingford. Must give Pix a call. Here in Montreal, I used to have a friend. She got hit by a car."

"Jessica Parr got hit by a car," Caldwell said and then he knocked back the drink he had been carrying. The girl behind the bar seemed to know him. When he set down his glass, she snatched it away and brought a refill. "I'm a poet and don't know it," he continued, his face a mask. "The creative world lost a great writer when I chose management. Actually, it chose me. When your father offers you an advertising agency, you'd be a fool not to accept it."

They had a couple of drinks and then Murphy and Caldwell wandered out into the night. The younger man was elated by the situation. A year ago he would never have imagined he would go carousing with the original owner of the agency.

"Let's get some food," Caldwell said. "At Ben's."

"Good idea. Here comes a bus."

"Never. Buses are filthy things. Full of common people coughing and spitting. I never go on any form of public transport." Caldwell was famous around the agency for his aversion to humanity in groups of more than four.

They covered the ground quickly to Ben's Delicatessen Restaurant. There they wolfed smoked-meat sandwiches with a side order of potato latkes, applesauce, and a couple of mugs of coffee. Outside again, Caldwell said, "Want to go to the Metcalfe?" You could always get into the Metcalfe.

"I do and I don't."

"Come to my place for a nightcap. I'm only just up the hill." Caldwell pointed to a highrise block a hundred yards up Stanley Street.

The building entrance was a palace, the elevator was clean, the corridor leading to Caldwell's flat could have been in a luxury liner, and the door was a slab of teakwood. Inside, the place was like McIntosh's littered office only on a grand scale.

"Sorry about the mess," Caldwell said as he switched on lamps, searching for ones with bulbs that worked. "I keep meaning to do a cleanup. I don't like having a woman come in. They lose things, or put them where you can't find them." He found the whiskey bottle and poured two drinks.

Murphy raised his glass. "To absent friends," he said.

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Caldwell drank and then said, "I have to see a man about a dog." He reeled down a corridor and soon Murphy heard the toilet flush.

"I'm next," Murphy said when his host came back. He located the bathroom but took a wrong turn on his way out and found himself in the bedroom. It was every bit as disarranged as the living room. He stood teetering in front of the dresser, observing the cascade of possessions on every surface, the accumulation from years of emptying pockets and never throwing anything away. His face smirked from the mirror while he surveyed the wreckage as if he were at the scene of an accident. Papers, coins, keys, letters—and there, a rectangle of paper with a date printed on it. July 4, the day after Murphy's birthday.

He picked it up and saw that it was the stub of a ticket issued by Provincial Coach Lines. Somebody had paid for a one-way ride from Ste. Agathe to Montreal. On the fourth of July last year. The day after Jessica's death by hit-run.

Caldwell had.

"You all right?" he called from the other room.

Murphy put the ticket stub in his pocket. "Got lost," he mumbled, "but I'm all right now."

Flick went Charlie McIntosh's brush, and a streak of orange tempera splattered across the Jackson Pollock imitation behind him, covering wall, baseboard, and floor. "You've got a funny way of wanting to spend your holiday," he told Murphy, who was standing at the window, looking out. "Driving up to Ste. Agathe. We've got taverns here in Montreal we haven't even got drunk in yet."

"I need you, Charlie. I can't rent a car—my license expired."

The artist glanced at his watch. The hand not using the brush was holding a cigarette at a graceful angle. He was handsome, talented, and confident, a man with a house in St. Bruno, a wife and five kids, and never fewer than two outside women in love with him. "And you promise to tell me before we get there why we're going?"

"I think so. I think I promise you that."

"You twisted my arm." Dip in the jar of paint, flick, streak. "Soon as I finish this layout, we'll get out of this fire-trap."

When it came to the point, Murphy was eager to tell his friend what was going on. He described his visit to Sergeant Lacombe, who gave the hunch no consideration at all. But intuition had turned to conviction following his discovery of the bus ticket stub on Vince

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Caldwell's dresser. "The date on it is July fourth last year—the day after Jess was knocked down."

"So what?"

"It means Caldwell took a bus ride back to Montreal that day from his place up north."

"Meaning?"

"I'm not sure. But everybody knows Caldwell hates to go anywhere unless it's by taxi or limousine, or else he's driving himself in one of his cars. He *never* gets on a bus."

McIntosh's style was to drive as if somebody else was driving. He talked, he yawned, he smoked, he gave the life-and-death responsibility about one quarter of his attention. "You're saying he had to come back by bus."

"Right."

"Why would he have to do that?"

"Because the front of his car got all smashed up when he drove into Jess."

McIntosh took both hands off the wheel and grabbed his head. "Too much!" he yelled as he resumed steering. "Jessica was out driving with Tiller and when the car breaks down and she gets out, she happens to get run over by the agency's other partner. Nobody is going to buy that coincidence."

"It wasn't coincidence. Caldwell was trailing Tiller's car by prearrangement. Tiller faked the breakdown and when Jessica was out on the shoulder, he watched for the other car and then pushed her in front of it."

For at least a mile, nobody said anything. Then Charlie said, "Tiller wanted her dead and he got Caldwell to help. Why?"

"I don't know the reason. I think it may be something to do with her husband in L.A."

Charlie was nodding, putting it together. "So the hit-run car, with its front end still damaged, and which the police never did find, is parked in a garage at Caldwell's place in Ste. Agathe." He glanced at his friend. "Unless you're going out of your mind."

"Every mile closer," Murphy said, "I feel less crazy."

Caldwell's summer house was a rambling affair set among mature pines and birch trees on a small plateau overlooking Three Mile Lake. It had a multiplicity of shingled roofs, glassed-in verandahs front and back, a half acre of flagstone patio, and a garage attached to the house on the side facing the lake.

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Murphy approached the garage door and handled the padlock. "The car is inside. I know it is." He began looking for a rock, found a heavy one in a flower bed.

"Breaking and entering?"

Murphy confirmed the charge by smashing the lock with the boulder until it popped open. Charlie couldn't watch. He turned away abruptly and moved down the slope toward the lake, keeping his eyes on the ground. A minute later, he was summoned. "Come and look at this!" Murphy called.

There it was, a black sedan backed into the garage so that its damaged front end could be seen clearly in the sunlight—shattered right headlight, dented fender, crumpled grill.

After a silent inspection, McIntosh said, "Okay, *you* feel this is the car that killed Jess, and maybe I believe it, too. But how do you prove it? Caldwell can say he hit a wall or something and hasn't got around to having it fixed."

"That's a job for the police. Lacombe will have ways."

The sound of a car approaching on the gravel road was accompanied by a flash of movement beyond the trees. Taken by surprise, the intruders had noplace to go. They were caught standing by the opened garage door when a car drove onto the property, driven by Jeremy Tiller with Vince Caldwell in the passenger seat.

"Charles," Murphy said patiently, "how does Tiller happen to be here?"

McIntosh's face was bursting. "Beats me."

"Who did you tell?"

"I had to say something to reception. I couldn't just leave the office in the middle of the day."

"What did you tell reception?"

"I said I was driving up north to scout locations for a TV commercial."

"Brilliant."

The agency owners approached, Tiller in the lead, Caldwell looking shattered. "As I expected," Tiller said. He turned to his partner. "I told you, Vince, it was a mistake fraternizing with this one. Murphy has a one-track mind."

"You'll have to explain this front end, Mr. Caldwell," Murphy said. "I've already told Sergeant Lacombe what I suspect."

"I warned you this was going to happen," Caldwell said. "It could never work."

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"Shut up, Vince. It *has* worked. Jessica has been dead for almost a year, the case is closed."

"Tell me why, Tiller. I figured you set her up on the highway and persuaded this poor fool to knock her over. But why?"

"Because she was pregnant. Not by me, more's the pity—I would have welcomed that but she refused to have *my* child. No, she was pregnant by that fat, drug-taking saxophone player in California. She went there for that reason, to stay with him for as long as it took. She wanted to go her own way." The snub still gnawed at Tiller's gut.

"She was willing to come back here and work for me, take my money, accept all kinds of hospitality and entertainment, even have sex, as long as she could have Parr's baby and strut around town—" his voice rose in pitch "—saying look how clever I am, the resourceful single parent." Tiller's eyes came back into focus. "I told her she couldn't have it both ways. She couldn't be his lady and my lady, too. When I offered to pay for the abortion at the best clinic in the world, she laughed at me."

"So you killed her? Because it would have embarrassed you socially if she'd stayed alive?"

Tiller became confident now that the story was out. "Vince killed her. That's Caldwell's car."

Murphy turned to Caldwell. "I understand Tiller—he's a maniac. But I don't see your excuse. I thought you were a mensch."

"He's a puppy-dog," Tiller said.

"It's true," Caldwell admitted. "If I had what it takes, my father's agency would have gone on succeeding under my control. But I don't have it. Sorry. Jeremy threatened to buy me out, take my name off the shingle. It's all I have—and it's quite a lot. At my club, they think I still run the place."

Charlie McIntosh spoke for the first time. The sun had dropped behind the pines, subtracting a few degrees from the temperature. He shivered as he said, "I think we should get in the car, Milt, and drive back to Montreal."

"You're getting in a car," Tiller said, "but not yours. The one behind you. Does it still run, Vince?"

"Yes."

"Good." Tiller reached inside his jacket and drew a pistol from the waistband of his trousers. "Time to tidy up this mess."

"What's he doing, Murph?" Charlie asked.

"It's simple," said Tiller. "We don't want anybody else to find the

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death-car, ever. We also don't want you and Murphy going to this Lacombe." He pointed with his free hand while holding the gun on his prisoners.

"The name Three Mile Lake refers to the extreme depth of the water. I think three miles is an exaggeration, but it's very deep indeed. The ground between here and the edge of the plateau where it overhangs the lake slopes quite steeply. With the pair of you inside the car—"

"Here's what we do," Murphy said, taking Charlie's elbow and starting to walk toward his car. "We call his bluff."

Charlie moaned beside him. "Jesus, Milt."

"He doesn't want to shoot us. Blood on the ground has to be cleaned up. Noise could attract a neighbor or somebody passing. Anyway, if I'm going to be murdered, I don't cooperate. Jess didn't realize what was happening, so she went along. Not me."

Tiller was following them. "I have too much at stake," he called, "to let you turn me in!"

Murphy opened the passenger-side door and got in. Charlie slipped in behind the wheel and the key rattled against the dash as he tried to find the ignition.

Tiller aimed the gun through the window and closed one eye. "You see my position, don't you? In for a penny, in for a pound."

"Drive," Murphy said to Charlie.

But before the artist could switch on, another car engine started up. Inside the garage, Vince Caldwell was at the wheel of the sedan, rolling out onto the gravel, heading for Tiller, picking up speed. Tiller whirled around, ran a few steps, saw he could not escape, aimed the gun with both hands, and fired—once, twice. The bullets penetrated the windshield but missed the driver. Caldwell kept coming, hit Tiller full on, knocked him flat, and dragged him thirty yards before the car passed on and left the body twisted, motionless.

The three men came to stand over Tiller. "That's another one for you, Vince," McIntosh said and he began laughing as though he might not stop for a while. "If you aren't careful, you'll lose your license."

Caldwell said to Murphy, who was on his knees examining Tiller, "Is he dead?"

"He seems to be breathing."

"Come inside. We'll call the ambulance from Ste. Agathe. And then we'll have a drink."

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It was raining on Soho Square. Pixie Hemmingford sat on a bench under the wooden shelter and watched the main doorway of Murphy's office building. When Milt appeared and she saw that he was by himself, she felt relieved.

"Where's your mate?" she asked when he settled on the bench beside her.

"Charlie thinks London is a great place to visit but he doesn't want to work here." Murphy seemed troubled. "So he's gone back to Montreal."

"What's the matter?"

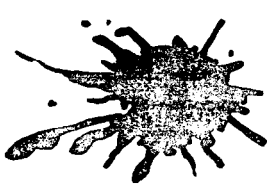
"Repercussions from the trial. Since Tiller and Caldwell have both been found guilty and put away, a couple of big clients are talking about taking their business to some other agency."

"Will that affect you?"

"Could do. They may have to cut staff."

"How very tedious," the punk beauty said. "I hoped we'd be getting back to normal."

Murphy had learned that when a friend is killed, the punishing of those responsible doesn't even things up. "What's normal?" he asked as they got up and he took the girl's hand and led her out into the rain.



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"The boy's got some strength to him," the man said. "You doing the chores around the house, boy? You taking care of ya momma?"

Before Jody could answer, his mother gave her own. "Somebody's got to. He's the only man I've had around here . . ."

THE LAST BANK ROBBERY

by RICHARD A. MOORE

The bedroom was still dark, but the first of the morning sunlight was creeping in when Jody awoke. He lay quietly for a few minutes, relishing the warmth of the covers on a chill September dawn. Sis was still asleep, but it was a restless sleep with turns and kicks indicating she, too, would be wide awake within the half hour.

Jody was almost eleven, six years older than his sister. He didn't much care for sharing his bed with Sis, but there were only two beds in the house, one for each room. Sis began every night in her mother's bed but was carried to Jody's early each morning when their mother rose to start the fire in the stove and get breakfast under way.

After a third kick in the side, Jody resisted the urge to kick back and instead swung his feet over the side of the bed. He dashed across to a cane-bottom chair where he'd slung his shirt and pants the night before. He dressed quickly and padded barefoot across the cold floor to the door. As his hand reached for the doorknob, he heard voices in the next room and froze. There shouldn't be voices unless his mother was talking to herself. That possibility was dismissed quickly when a man's laughter interrupted the murmur of conversation. Jody reached out and twisted the knob slowly, drawing the door open a crack.

A man sat at the table, gripping a cup of coffee with both hands. Although he was slouched down in the straight-backed chair, the boy could tell he would be a couple of inches over six feet when standing. He was thin without appearing weak and his close-cropped hair was as dark as the inside of a chimney.

Recognition came slowly to Jody. But it came, and along with recognition was an army of mixed emotions.

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The man's lips were smiling but his dark eyes never ceased their darting probes of the room. In a very few seconds, he had spotted the cracked door and the hovering figure of the boy.

"Come on in here, boy."

Jody opened the door and walked to his mother, who was standing before the stove. She wasn't quite thirty, but grey in her light brown hair made her appear older—as did lines on her face born of concerns that mere youth couldn't defeat.

"Esther, how this boy has grown! By God, he's going to be a biggun."

She turned from the stove and ran her hand over Jody's head, then lightly held his shoulder. "You been gone five years now, Sam. Kids grow a lot in that time. Sissy was just a baby when you left. Wait till you see her. She's waist high."

Sam smiled at the boy and held out an arm. "Come here, boy. Let me get a good look at you."

Jody didn't immediately respond.

"You know me, don'cha?"

Jody nodded and slowly walked over to the table. When he was within reach, Sam grabbed him with both hands. Jody thought for a moment he was going to be hugged, but the man just held him at arm's length and studied him carefully.

Jody stood it for a few moments and then tried to pull away. The man kept his grip and smiled. "The boy's got some strength to him," he said. "You doing the chores around the house, boy? You taking care of ya momma?"

Before Jody could answer, his mother gave her own. "Somebody's got to. He's the only man I've had around here."

Sam frowned a moment and then laughed. "By God, he better be." He turned the boy loose and Jody walked around to the other side of the table and sat down in one of the chairs.

"You want some breakfast, son?" his mother asked. "I got some streak-o-lean done and I'm about to fry up some eggs and make biscuits and gravy."

Jody nodded his agreement. His usual breakfast was a piece of fried salt pork in a cold biscuit left over from the previous night's supper.

The man was watching him but Jody didn't want to meet his eyes. A kerosene lantern hissed to itself in the center of the table. Jody stared at the lamp and then dropped his eyes to the floor. Beside the table was a clump of white clothes with blue stripes. The man

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had obviously changed since his arrival—now he was dressed in faded blue jeans and a flannel shirt.

Jody could hear the eggs hitting the hot pork grease and he felt his stomach turn over in hunger.

"Need some more coffee here, honey," Sam said.

Esther brought over the pot and poured it for him.

"Thanks. I'm not used to being able to get seconds," he said.

Jody spoke for the first time that morning. "You come back for good?"

Sam shook his head. "Wish I had, but I'm fixing to leave. Gotta eat and run." He hesitated a moment and repeated the last word in almost a mumble. "Run." But he immediately put on a hearty air again. "But it's good to see you again, partner. I've thought about you a lot."

The boy said nothing and his silence caused the man to squirm. "I should have written you, but I ain't much for writing."

Jody looked down at the table. "That's okay."

Esther scooped the eggs from the black iron skillet and poured most of the grease into an old coffee can. She put the skillet back on the stove and dropped in several tablespoons of flour that immediately began to brown. After checking the biscuits, she tossed a cup of milk and a cup of cold water into the skillet, and after an initial roar the mixture cooled below the boiling point and then slowly began to reheat.

"His birthday's next Sunday," she said, more to fill the silence than anything else.

"Is that a fact," Sam replied.

"Be eleven," the boy answered before the question was even asked.

"Eleven years old. My, my. Don't seem that long at all to me," Sam said. "You doing anything special on your birthday?"

"Going hunting," Jody said.

Sam slowly sat up in his chair. "You been using that little twenty-gauge I gave you?" The shotgun was his last present to Jody, left for when the boy was old enough to hunt. Jody had cleaned it a hundred times before he was allowed to fire it.

Esther checked the biscuits and saw they were ready. "I let him hunt. We can use the rabbits and the squirrels he brings in. You wouldn't believe the price of meat at the store." She poured the bubbling brown gravy from the skillet into a bowl, scraping every drop free with a tablespoon. "The boy takes after his daddy." She

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brought the food over to the table. "Hunting, I mean. He's a good hunter."

Sam seemed as if he had more to say but postponed it to eat, splitting open two biscuits and covering them with gravy. Both ate hungrily, cleaning their plates and reaching for seconds at the same time. "Maybe we better save this for your mother and sister," Sam said.

"Ya'll go ahead. I'll cook some more for us," Esther said. "This is a special occasion."

When the food was gone, Sam pulled out a pouch of tobacco and papers and rolled a cigarette. "I got to be gettin' on here in a minute. Esther, you have any money?"

She stopped washing dishes but didn't turn to look at him. "I got five dollars. You're welcome to that."

Sam glanced at the boy. "Go get your shotgun, boy. I'd like to take a look at it."

The boy got up from the table and went into the other room. While he was gone, his mother whispered urgently. "Sam, don't you take that from the boy. It's the one special thing he loves, and it's about all he ever got from you."

"I may need it, Esther."

"It'll get you killed," she said furiously as Jody returned with the shotgun.

Sam took it from Jody's hands. It was a single-shot twenty-gauge with a short stock made for a boy. Sam broke it open and a shell popped out. "You shouldn't ought to keep it loaded around the house," he said as he picked the shell up from the floor and put it back into the gun. "Sister could get to playing with this thing and then there'd be trouble for sure."

"Yessir," Jody said.

Sam sighed and squatted down next to the boy. Their eyes were now on the same level. He put his hand on Jody's shoulder. "Would you mind if I borrowed this shotgun from you for a few days?"

Jody's face fell. He didn't know what to say.

"I'd send it back to you after I didn't need it no more," Sam said.

Jody gritted his teeth and put his chin down on his chest. "Okay, I guess."

"You can't leave here without at least seeing your girl," Esther said. "She'd die if you came and went and she didn't get to see you."

Sam stood up. "Jody, you hold the gun for me and get the shells you have. I'll be needing them, too." Jody didn't look at him. He took

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the gun and walked over to an old dresser and pulled down the box of shells.

Sam and Esther went into the other room. Sis was just coming awake. She sat up in bed rubbing her eyes. "Mama?" she said softly.

"It's me, honey," Esther said, sitting down on the bed next to her. "We got somebody here that wants to meet you."

Sam sat down on the bed and reached for the girl, but the five-year-old was in her mother's arms, holding tight. "Here now, let me get a look at you," he said. "I bet you don't even know who this is."

The girl still refused to look. But Esther whispered into her ear and Sis slowly moved her head to peek.

"Is he really?" she asked.

Esther nodded. "That's your father."

The girl allowed Sam to hold her then. He talked to her for a few minutes, but his eyes had discovered something else in the room on top of a battered old dresser and it was a distraction he couldn't battle. Finally he shifted the girl back to her mother's lap.

"I got to be going. They'll know I'm gone now and be calling the county sheriff here. He'll come out to check on you and I need to be a ways down the road when that happens." He stood up and walked to the dresser. On top was a ceramic piggy bank in the shape of an elephant. He lifted it and felt how heavy it was.

"Now, Sam, you can't be thinking that," Esther said. "That's the girl's."

He looked over at the bed where the two were sitting. "Five dollars ain't much to get where I need to get."

Before the mother could say anything, it dawned on the girl what was about to happen. "You put that down!" she yelled. "That's mine!"

As if to end all discussion, Sam knocked the elephant's head off by hitting it on the edge of the dresser. A few coins fell on the floor and began to roll. There was a stunned silence from the bed that was broken by screams of anguish. Sam poured the coins onto the dresser and then leaned down to pick up those that had fallen.

The screams subsided into sobs. Esther held her daughter tightly. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Robbing a little girl."

The daughter pushed herself down from Esther's lap and flew across the room. She began hitting at Sam, trying to yell something but unable to do more than cry. Sam picked her up roughly and carried her toward his wife.

"You put her down," Jody called from the doorway. The shotgun

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was on his shoulder and he was squinting down the barrel at Sam's chest.

The man handed the girl to her mother and stepped back. He thought about taking a step forward but reconsidered when he saw the hammer on the shotgun was cocked.

"All right, son," Sam said quietly. "I'll leave."

"And put the money back."

Sam nodded and stopped at the dresser to empty his pockets of the coins. Then he walked past the boy to the front door. Jody followed him all the way.

Sam stopped at the bottom of the steps and looked up at Jody. "You wouldn't have shot your old man, would you?"

Jody lowered the shotgun and thumbed the hammer down into a half-cock safety. "I dunno."

Sam turned to leave. Jody struggled to sort out a tangle of urges and emotions.

"Wait a minute." He walked down the steps and held out the shotgun, stock first. "You said you'd be needing this."

Sam looked down at him and shook his head. "Momma's right. It'd just get me in more trouble than I am already. You better keep it."

He walked across the yard and didn't look back. Not even when Jody called, "Goodbye, Daddy."

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a *NEW* short story by

ROBERT BARNARD

"We could try the Mayflower at Kirkby again," Herbie said.

"Is that the pub your father took us to? Said he'd had a marvelous rump steak there that nearly filled the plate? Then when he took us it was very disappointing. Mingy little portions, and tough at that, and hardly enough chips to feed a baby?"

"It'd changed management."

"It had. They ought to warn people. I remember your dad after that meal. Hardly said a word all afternoon. No thank you, we won't try there again."

A succulent confection from the justly popular Robert Barnard . . .

BLOWN UP

by ROBERT BARNARD

"Would you like another cheese-and-onion twisty?" asked Annie Monkton in the passenger seat, pushing the bag in the direction of the steering wheel.

"No thanks, Ma. I've got the prawn cocktail crisps," said her son Herbie, speeding up the M1, but brandishing the bag with his free hand.

"You like those, don't you? I like them now and *again*."

"Have one, Ma."

"Ta, I don't mind if I do."

Her arm wobbled over toward the bag and her elbow pushed itself companionably into her son's comfortable belly. Herbie was six foot three and seventeen stone, and Annie was five foot six and thirteen stone, so their bodies in the little Fiat were touching constantly. But

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they'd had many trips over the years in the small car and had learned to cope without friction.

"That was nice for a change," said Annie, munching. "Tasty. Do you remember that seafood cocktail we had at the Monk's Head in Kendall that year?"

"That was brilliant!" said Herbie enthusiastically. "That had everything: prawn, crab, cod, smoked haddock. It was Dad recommended that hotel."

"He was good on hotels, was your dad. It was him having been a traveler, I suppose."

"You'd remember, wouldn't you, where you'd had really good nosh, and where it hadn't come up to standard."

They sped through the county of Nottinghamshire, their eyes on the highway, except when they dropped to the bags in their hands.

"I've got coconut ice in my handbag," said Annie. "Fancy a bit, son?"

"No, I think I'll stick with the smoked almonds."

They munched contentedly. Herbie was thinking. "Do you remember that coconut ice we got in the market in Leeds last year—with all the glacé bits in, and the peel?"

"I do. I've often thought about that coconut ice."

"Now," said Herbie, when he had got his thoughts in order, "what I'm wondering is, are we going to stop for lunch at the White Hart in Hunstable or at the Fox and Newt in Carditch? Or we could even try the Mayflower at Kirkby again."

"Is that the pub your father took us to? Said he'd had a marvelous rump steak there that nearly filled the plate? Then when he took us it was very disappointing. Mingy little portions, and tough at that, and hardly enough chips to feed a baby?"

"It'd changed management."

"It had. They ought to warn people. I remember your dad after that meal. Hardly said a word all afternoon. No thank you, we won't try there again. I won't be done twice over. Let's see, the White Hart's where they do that lovely steak-and-mushroom pie, isn't it?"

"That's right. Massive portions. With jacket potatoes with grated cheese on."

"Oh, yes. I remember that. Melted in the mouth. And the Fox and Newt's where we had that lovely plaice and chips, where the chips was practically unlimited."

"That's right. I don't know when I've had better plaice and chips."

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"Still, I think I fancy the steak-and-mushroom today. We'll have time to digest it before we have our dinner."

So they stopped at the White Hart, and it hadn't changed hands, and they had the steak-and-mushroom, and the potatoes with the melted cheese, and a very generous helping of boiled carrots. Annie washed hers down with a gin-and-tonic, and Herbie washed his down with a pint of bitter. Just when they thought they'd finished, Herbie wondered whether he couldn't manage a piece of that Black Forest gâteau he'd seen at the food bar and Annie wondered whether she couldn't, too, and she said she'd buy another round of drinks to go with it if Herbie would just fetch them from the bar. So they had the gâteau, too, and another round of drinks, and they were very pleased they did.

"That was lovely," Annie said. "That was almost as good as that Black Forest gâteau they make at the King's Head in Shoreditch. You know, the one your dad always swore by."

"That's right. He loved his Black Forest gâteau, didn't he? We must go out to the King's Head again sometime. We haven't been there since he died."

"Not since he had his attack, in actual fact. I didn't like it after your dad had his attack. I mean, we couldn't get around as we'd been used to, could we? —Still, I must say, that gâteau we've just had was almost as good and very nice-sized portions, too. That should keep us going until dinner."

As they went toward the car, Annie said: "Even your dad would have been satisfied with that meal. Walter was always less snappy when he'd really got his money's worth, wasn't he?"

They opened the boot, and Annie got out her large holdall and took from it a supersize bar of fruit and nut, some licorice comfits, and a bag of bacon munchies. Herbert took a packet of potato sticks and a tin of cashews—because, as he said, he'd had enough sweet things for the moment. They drove on, out of Nottinghamshire and into Yorkshire, perfectly happy.

"I like Yorkshire," said Annie. "They always do you proud in Yorkshire."

"They know how to appreciate food in the North," said Herbie.

"They do. You can see it in the people."

"The question is," said Herbie, lighting up a cigarette between the potato sticks and the smoked almonds, "are we going to drive

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on up to the Lake District tonight or are we going to stop off in Yorkshire somewhere?"

"Oh, I thought we'd agreed. Stop off. No point in overdoing it. We're not in a race. We've got the whole weekend, and we don't have to be home till Monday night. There's lots of lovely hotels in Yorkshire where they always make you ever so welcome. There's Manor Court, just outside Ilkley, where they do that marvelous table d'hôte for six pounds fifty a head."

They talked over the various alternatives and finally decided to save Manor Court for the Sunday on the way back and to spend the night at the Devonshire Arms in Spenlow. They enjoyed a pre-dinner lager-and-lime in the bar while they went through the menu. Finally, Herbie ordered the smoked salmon, followed by rump steak with French fries, and Annie ordered the seafood platter, followed by filet of pork Wellington. Herbie had a pint of bitter at table and Annie a snowball and they were as near as possible in a state of perfect bliss when Annie, over the pork Wellington, which she happily observed nearly covered the plate, suddenly remembered something.

"Here," she said, "it's just come to me. The Devonshire Arms was the last place we ever stayed with your dad. Last trip we ever had. We stayed here at the Devonshire Arms on the way down from Skye and the Western Isles."

"Did we, Ma? I'd never have remembered that."

"Well, you should. Three days later he had his first attack."

"I remember it was soon after we got back."

"And do you know what he had for his dinner that night? Filet of pork Wellington!"

For a moment the remembrance of things past seemed to cast a shadow over the meal. Annie looked at the great expanse of pork that had been set before her, and she gave the dead Walter the tribute of a passing sigh. Then she took a sup of her snowball, smiled at her son, and set to again with a will.

"Doesn't do to take things like that, does it?" she said.

"Thinking won't bring him back," said Herbie.

Next morning, they had an English breakfast of egg, bacon, sausage, tomatoes, mushrooms, and fried potatoes, with the Yorkshire addition of black pudding, which Herbie pronounced "not bad, but I don't think I'd want it as a regular thing." He considered the

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porridge excellent, though, especially with the golden syrup over, and Annie gave her blessing to the marmalade.

"It's one of my criterions," she said. "You can tell the real class of a hotel. That's none of your cheap stuff—" and she waved her pudgy hand at the pot "—because there's no question of skimping here."

When they'd paid their bill, Herbie humped their luggage to the car—just the one small case because Herbie hated lugging heavy cases and considered it shortened your life span—and they set off again.

"People are silly, giving up good English breakfasts," said Annie as they drove out of the drive. "They set you up for the day." She slipped into her mouth a piece of chocolate nougat and chewed contentedly. "That meal last night," she said, "the pork Wellington, would have been one of the last good meals your dad ever ate. Apart from the ones I cooked him, of course. The *very* last meal he ate out. He liked eating out, your dad. I never knew a better judge of whether he'd had value for money."

"Wasn't any point in him eating out, not after his attack," said Herbie. "Not with the sort of stuff he was allowed to eat."

"No. Imagine going into an Italian restaurant and saying 'I want a nice piece of boiled fish and some boiled potatoes to go with it.' They'd split their sides laughing."

"I don't think Dad had the *heart* to eat out again," said Herbie.

"That's it. It was funny, really. Do you remember that mini-cruise we took to Norway—oh, back in 'seventy or 'seventy-one it must have been—and how Dad hated all that boiled fish and boiled potatoes we had? It was boiled potatoes with every meal, wasn't it? Just the most uninteresting way of having potatoes, *I* always say. Your dad was really disgusted, considering the price we'd paid. And then when he comes out of hospital, to have to have boiled fish and boiled potatoes and all that horrible invalid food. It was almost as if the doctor who drew up the diet sheet knew about Dad's likes and dislikes and was trying to get his own back. Because your dad was not an easy patient. Short-tempered—"

"Well, you was very good to him, Ma. You cooked it all for him, didn't you?"

"I did. Though it turned my stomach sometimes, quite apart from the extra work. I mean, the only thing we could've eaten that was on his diet was the shepherd's pie, and he wasn't to have that more

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than once a week. So there was his little messes to do, on top of the things for ourselves. It was pitiful watching him eating it."

"And watching *him* watching *us*, eh, Ma?"

Annie Monkton gurgled a little laugh.

"Well, he *was* a picture, I'll give you that. But I still think it was diabolical, that diet sheet. It can't have been necessary. I'm no doctor, but I do know a grown man's got to eat enough to keep body and soul together. To see him sitting there with his pea soup, and the rusk he was supposed to have with it, while we were tucking into the steak pizzaola with the sauté potatoes and the baked eggplant—well, I said at the time it wasn't right."

"I think it was the sweets that got him most, Ma. That peach Melba you used to make, with the thick whipped cream and the black cherry jam on top. He used to look at that, gaze you might say, like he was transfixed, like he begrudged us every mouthful. We haven't had your peach Melba lately, have we, Ma?"

"Here, don't go so fast," said Annie, as they sped along the shores of Lake Windermere. "We don't want to get to Keswick too early for lunch."

They both had fresh Scottish salmon for lunch, with French fries, peas, and beans. "You pay for Scottish salmon," said Herbie, "but it does have that touch of class." The thought of how much they'd paid for the salmon made them shake their heads reluctantly over the cheese and walnut gâteau. Afterward they both had a little nap in the car park of the Keswick hotel where they'd eaten and then Herbie got out his map and they decided where to stay for the night, nibbling at a little bag of savory sticks. It was a question of whether to go over to Buttermere and then on to the coast and stay at Whitehaven, or whether to take a leisurely trip around Ullswater and overnight at Penrith.

"I'd go for Penrith," said Annie. "The Borderer at Penrith. I've got a fancy to try their venison again. I know it's extravagant, but we *are* on holiday."

She had woken from her nap with her mind greatly refreshed. "Do you know," she said as they started, "I don't think they put as much fruit in fruit-and-nut chocolate as they used to. Or as much nut, come to that."

"That's the way the cookie crumbles," said Herbie, not altogether appositely.

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They drove along the north shores of Ullswater, passing as they did so, though without seeing them, several hosts of golden daffodils.

"This is a good road now," said Herbie, increasing the speed. "A sight better than when we first came up, eh, Ma? Then you really had to dawdle 'round, because of the potholes."

But his mother's mind was on other things.

"I didn't *really* enjoy your father gazing at us eating like he used to after his attack," she said, switching from the fruit-and-nut to the peppermint fondant. "I'm not cruel, you know that, Herbie. In fact, though it was a bit of a laugh at first, after a time I found it really put me off my food, being watched like that. I just wasn't enjoying it any more. I remember sitting there eating a slice of one of my homemade pork pies—with all that lovely jelly, just as I like it—and your dad was toying with his omelette and just looking at my plate greedily—because, not to speak ill of the dead, he could be greedy, your dad—and I thought: I can't enjoy this like I should be doing, not with Walter looking on like he wants to grab every forkful from me. It was as much as I could do to finish it."

"Perhaps he should have ate separately, Ma."

"That would have been like putting him in an insulation ward. No, no, we was a family and we ate as a family. I must say I was glad when they said he could start relaxing the diet."

Herbert drove on again, dipping into his bag of salt-and-vinegar-flavored crisps.

"I think they meant gradually, Ma."

"Well, of course! That was how we went, wasn't it? The whole of the first week we hardly changed his old diet at all. I just gave him a bit of stewed apple or a tiny bit of jam roly-poly for afters. I said to him, I said: 'Keep well *under* for the first few days, then you can go *over* on Sunday, have a bit of a blowout."

Herbert was quiet for a bit, then he said: "Well, he enjoyed it, I will say that."

"Oh, he did. He'd been looking forward to it all week. You could feel the juices running. We talked it all over, you know. There was the lobster paté, which was his favorite, as starters, with the little fingers of buttered toast. Then there were the pork steaks with the mushroom cream sauce that he loved, and the scalloped potatoes and the glazed carrots and the cauliflower in cheese sauce. Then there was the Madeira chocolate cake with the sherry-cream topping—the one I got the recipe for out of *Women's Own*. We'd planned it all. It was a lovely meal."

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"A meal fit for a king," admitted Herbie.

"And I didn't make any trouble over cooking it, though none of it was convenience foods. I had to do it all with my own hands, but it was a pleasure to me to do it. I loved cooking it for him."

"And he loved eating it," said Herbie. "Even the chocolate cake."

"Well, it was the best I'd ever made. I thought so myself when I ate up the rest the next day. It was perfection. Maybe it was *so* good that in a way he—couldn't stand it."

"It wasn't a bad way to go," said Herbie.

"It was a very *good* way to go. I hope I go like that when my time comes. And it was quick, too. We'd hardly got him upstairs into the bed before he was gone. A darned sight better than lingering, that's what I say."

"It's what I'd call a good death."

"So would I. And I'd have been almost happy about it if it hadn't been for that bleeding doctor," said Annie, getting almost agitated and taking out of her handbag a tiny handkerchief, which she dabbed at her eyes.

"Doctor Causley?" said Herbert, surprised. "He never said anything out of turn in the bedroom."

"No. It was when he came downstairs. I never told you this, son, because I thought it would make you wild. I'd gone downstairs, being upset, to have a bit of a weep by the fire in the dining room. And he came downstairs and he came in, and he was just starting to say something when— Well, you see, the plates with the sweets was still on the table, with his bit of the chocolate cake still uneaten, which had gone to my heart when I came in, and he saw that, and he saw the other plates piled up on the sideboard and he looked at them—in*spect*ed I'd call it, in a thoroughly nasty way—and he said, 'Had he been eating this?' and I said yes, and explained we'd been sort of saving up on the calories so he could have one good blowout, and he said, 'What exactly did he have?' and so I told him. And do you know what he said?"

"No, Ma. What did he say?"

"He said: 'That meal killed him as surely as if you'd laced it with strychnine.' "

Herbie didn't go wild, but he thought for a bit.

"That wasn't very nice of him."

"It was diabolical. You could have knocked me down with a feather! Me just widowed not five minutes since."

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"It was a liberty. These professional people take too much on themselves."

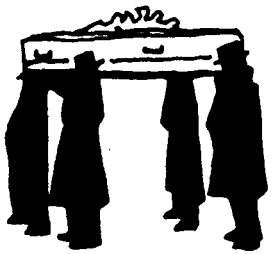
"They do. Your dad always said that, too. It was a wicked, cruel thing to say. And you notice he never had any doubt about signing the death certificate. That's why I changed my doctor. I never could fancy going back to Doctor Causley after that. I know I haven't got anything to reproach myself with."

They went quiet after that and Annie Monkton found a sucky sweet in her bag and comforted herself with it. Quite soon they were drawing up in the courtyard of The Borderer. Herbie got out and made sure they'd got rooms. Luckily the tourist season was only just beginning. He came back smiling.

"Couldn't be better. Two nice singles. I took a peek at the dinner menu, Ma. You'll be able to have the venison. I've worked up an appetite, so I think I'm going to fancy the mixed grill."

As he took the case from the boot and they started toward the main door, Annie's good humor returned. She nudged Herbie with her fat arm.

"It's nice being on our own, though, isn't it, son?"



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a *NEW* Mahboob Chaudri story by

JOSH PACHTER

A spare but spirited story in Josh Pachter's colorful series—in which the scrupulous Pakistani policeman, Mahboob Chaudri, in Marrakesh on brief assignment, looks for a souvenir to remind him forever of his free afternoon in the city's main square, the enormous, tented Jemaa el Fna . . .

THE EXCHANGE

by JOSH PACHTER

"Biqam?" asked Mahboob Chaudri, holding the ceremonial Berber belt in his hands and gazing admiringly at its bold colors and long tassels and glittering bits of mirror. "How much?" The belt would be an extravagance at any price, but Chaudri had promised himself an extravagance this day, and after hours of searching through the *souks* of Marrakesh he wondered if this at last might not be it.

"No, no, my friend," the merchant smiled, wagging a chiding finger at the Pakistani and his companion, fellow Public Security Officer Sikander Malek. "How much you like to pay?"

Chaudri had already bought souvenirs for his children and his wife, spending—after much bargaining—some fifty dirham on each of them. Now he had a last fifty dirham set aside for himself. He had long since grown tired of the ritual haggling. It was clearly expected of him, though, so he fingered the belt with apparent indifference and began the game with an offer of fifteen dirham.

The Arab laughed. "This is a very fine piece," he explained. "*Very* fine. But because you are visitors to my country, I make you a special price: two hondred dirham."

Chaudri and Malek had arrived in Marrakesh four days earlier

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as part of the twelve-man security team accompanying His Highness the Minister of Defense and his staff. Today was the first time the duty rotation had allowed them a day of rest, and it was to be their only time off of the trip: the Conference of Non-Aligned Nations which His Highness was attending was due to end within twenty-four hours and the Bahraini contingent would be flying back to Manama as soon as the final session was over.

"Two hundred dirham?" Chaudri feigned shock and laid down the belt. *"La, la, da hrali awi."*

The merchant scooped it up again and held it out to him. "No, my frien', it's not too much. Look, you pay hondred-fitty dirham, okay?"

Chaudri waved away the offer. "Thirty dirham," he said firmly, with the voice he used to interrogate a suspect.

The Arab pressed the belt into his hands. "Not thutty," he compromised, "not hondred-fitty. We say hondred-thutty dirham, you happy, me happy."

"Da akhir taman?" the Pakistani asked. "Is that your lowest price?"

The smile disappeared from the merchant's face. The foreigner in the olive-green uniform had asked that crucial question much too soon. He will never pay my final price, the Arab saw, and I will make no profit if I give it to him for his. He shook his head sadly and took back the belt, folded it together, and returned it to its place. The game was over and both of the players had lost.

Disappointed, Mahboob Chaudri shook the brown hand the merchant held out to him and turned away from the shop. The Berber belt would have looked beautiful hanging above his bed in the police barracks back in Juffair, but—

"Never mind," Sikander Malek consoled him. "Perhaps you will find something even better when we get to the Jemaa."

"These Moroccans are amazingly clever," muttered Chaudri as they strolled beneath the green-canvas awnings which protected the *souks* from the fierce heat of the afternoon sun. "Somehow—I don't know how—they seem to *know* who will be buying and who will not. They are, I think, the finest observers of human nature I have ever seen. They would make excellent policemen, all of them—or excellent criminals."

They twisted and turned through the tangled maze of bustling alleyways and finally broke out of the coolness of the Medina into the bright pandemonium that was the Jemaa el Fna, the city's main square, an enormous tent city where each of the tents was a self-

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contained shop and hundreds of Arabs too poor to afford even a tent prowled up and down the haphazard arrangement of aisles with their entire stock of merchandise draped carefully over their shoulders and arms.

Teenaged boys in tattered shorts and nothing else offered fists full of handcarved hash pipes with fragile clay bowls. Grizzled old men sang the praises of "antique" daggers, which were turned out by the thousands by craftsmen from the Middle Atlas Mountains, and cheap woolen blankets their wives and unmarried daughters toiled over in their ramshackle cottages in the poorest sections of town. Watersellers in tasseled red hats and red jackets studded with coins from around the world poured sparkling spring water from the bulging goatskins slung over their shoulders into shining brass drinking bowls and dirt-caked gypsy girls were half hidden beneath their collections of handwoven wicker baskets. Ancient crones sat cross-legged in the dust, knitting bright skullcaps with nimble fingers and looking up now and again to wave their work-in-progress at the passersby and yell, "Three dirham! Three!"

But the Jemaa el Fna was not just a place for shopping. Shoeshine boys clustered wherever one turned. There were guess-your-weight men with heavy old scales and fiery preachers with nothing but an upturned orange crate and a mission from God. There was a long row of tents which served as restaurants where Berger chefs kept aromatic stews bubbling in heavy iron pots and spicy skewered meats roasting over open fires. There were beggars everywhere —crippled, diseased, one-eyed, blind—crying for alms and offering nothing in return save the knowledge that the giver had fulfilled the third of the five sacred pillars of Islam: *Zahat*, which is the command to be charitable to the unfortunate.

More than anything else, there was entertainment. Not even in the streets of Karachi had Chaudri and Malek seen such an abundance of jugglers, dancers, singers, musicians, storytellers, fire eaters, magicians, and acrobats. They watched, entranced, as a snake charmer flung away his wooden flute, grabbed up three monstrous hooded cobras, and stuffed them down the front of his baggy white pantaloons. With a piercing scream, the man dropped to the ground and writhed in wonderfully overplayed agony, clutching wretchedly at his groin and pleading for mercy in a comic mixture of Arabic, French, and English.

For more than an hour they roamed around the square, pausing to hear snatches of a speech or a song, to see trained monkeys with

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faces almost human in their intensity perform simple tricks at the ends of their thin red leashes, to watch children act out elaborate playlets while the youngest member of the troupe approached each onlooker with an upturned palm and a look of forlorn entreaty.

At the edge of the Jemaa, they found a small knot of men gathered around a cardboard carton, buzzing with excitement and waving hundred-dirham bills eagerly. The group's attention was focused on a young man in a yellow-and-brown-striped djelleba in the center of the circle who was busily arranging a length of cord on the upper surface of the carton to form two small loops, with some ten centimeters of cord left over at either end. The loudest of the spectators slapped his money down next to the pattern, then stabbed a forefinger into one of the loops. There rose a mixed chorus of groans and approval, then the crowd fell silent as the young man in the striped djelleba took one end of the cord in each hand. With a dramatic flourish, he pulled the cord taut and the loop snapped closed around the other man's finger. Happy cheers rang out and the young man released the other's finger and returned his wager along with a second hundred-dirham note from the pocket of his djelleba.

As they watched, Chaudri and Malek saw that the rules of the game were simple. If a gambler selected the correct loop, the cord would trap his finger when pulled and he would win a hundred dirham. If he picked wrong, the cord would pull free and he would lose his bet.

After seeing the sequence repeated several times, the Pakistanis turned to go. But suddenly there were hands tugging at Chaudri's sleeves and the players were urging him back toward the cardboard carton.

"*La, la,*" he said politely, holding up his hands in a gesture of refusal, but the young man in the djelleba waved his hesitation away and grinned, "No money! No money! Just for try!"

Chaudri glanced back over his shoulder at Sikander Malek, who shrugged as if to say, Do not be asking *me*, my friend.

"Well, all right," Chaudri decided, handing over his armload of parcels to his companion. "Just for try."

Encouraging noises bubbled up from the crowd. The cord was arranged on the surface of the carton and then there was silence as Chaudri studied the simple arrangement of loops. "I see," he murmured at last, and confidently touched a forefinger to the center of the smaller circle.

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There were cries of agreement, there were cries of dismay, and then again there was a hush of eager expectation.

The young man in the striped djelleba pulled on the loose ends of his cord, and as the larger loop shrank and disappeared the other caught Chaudri's finger tightly. The crowd exploded with glee, and with an incredibly swift movement of his hand the proprietor pressed a hundred-dirham note into Chaudri's palm.

"Oh, dearie me, no," Mahboob protested. "No money, do you not remember? Just for try?"

But the man in the djelleba would not accept the return of the bill. "You win! You win!" he chanted, as if the words were a prayer, and the other players nodded their heads and jabbered their agreement in liquid Arabic syllables. Even Sikander Malek shouted over the din, "Why do you argue, my friend? You've won! Keep the money!"

"Absolutely not," said Chaudri firmly. "The man said just for try and I consented. If I had guessed wrongly, I would not have paid him. Guessing rightly, I may not profit."

The proprietor recognized his determination. "You keep half," he suggested. "I give you hundred dirham, you give me back fifty. Then we both win, yes?"

At that, Chaudri's jet-black eyes gleamed with understanding and he pulled his wallet from his hip pocket and fished out a crisp new fifty-dirham note. The young man in the djelleba snatched it from his hand—and as if some powerful djinn had performed a feat of magic the Pakistanis found themselves alone at the edge of the Jemaa el Fna. Proprietor, gamblers, length of cord—all vanished so abruptly that their very existence might have been nothing but the memory of a dream were it not for the sagging cardboard carton left behind and the hundred-dirham bill in Chaudri's hand.

"Fascinating," he said softly, looking around in vain for any other trace of the scene they had just been part of. "Most fascinating. How many gentlemen would you say were here just now?"

Malek frowned. "How many? Eight, perhaps, including the man with the cord. Eight or nine."

"Eight or nine. That means, say, ten dirham for him and five for each of his accomplices. Not bad for only five minutes' work."

Sikander Malek was staring at him. "What is it you are saying, Chaudri? I am not understanding you at all."

Chaudri smiled. "Ah, my friend, I apologize. I assumed that you saw it, too."

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"Saw it? Saw *what*, man?"

"The arrangement of the cord. No matter which of the loops I had chosen, the cord would have caught around my finger when pulled."

"You mean—you mean they *wanted* you to win?"

Chaudri clapped his companion on the shoulder. "Yes, of course. That was why they were here in the first place, pretending to play their most fascinating game. They were waiting for us to come along—or someone like us—waiting for the chance to let me win, 'just for try.' " He chuckled at the thought. "These men make their living with this little game of theirs. They set up their carton here and play, and when the right tourist comes along they urge him to enter their game."

"The *right* tourist?"

"Indeed. I said it earlier. These people can judge a man's character as expertly as others we have seen today can guess his weight. *You* would have kept the hundred dirham, my friend, where I would not. That is why they chose *me* to play their game instead of you. They saw that I am a man who would refuse to keep the full amount pressed into my palm, but who could be persuaded to take half in the spirit of fairness."

Malek seemed more perplexed than ever. "But you say they make a living at this game? How can that be? The man gave you one hundred dirham and took back fifty. He lost fifty dirham in the exchange!"

"No, no," Chaudri shook his head. "He took fifty dirham from me and in return he gave me this." He handed the hundred-dirham note to Malek, who examined it briefly and then looked up with comprehension dawning in his eyes.

"Counterfeit?"

Chaudri nodded. "A trifle, worth nothing at all. Perhaps they make them themselves, perhaps they buy them for a dirham or two. Either way, they sell them to unsuspecting tourists for fifty dirham, almost all of which is pure profit."

"But you were *not* unsuspecting—you knew what they were up to all the time!"

"Yes, I did. I was certain it was a con game even before they invited me to play. It all seemed too smooth, too carefully rehearsed to be spontaneous."

"Then why did you agree to take part?" Malek demanded. "Why did you give them your money?"

A broad grin spread across Mahboob Chaudri's nut-brown face.

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"For fifty dirham," he said happily, "we have had the opportunity to participate in Moroccan street theater at its finest. But there is something more important than that." He took the counterfeit bill from Malek's fingers and held it up between them. "For fifty dirham," he said, "I have bought myself the souvenir I was searching for, a souvenir which will forever remind me of our afternoon in Marrakesh."

DETECTIVERSE

IMAGINE HIS SURPRISE

by WILLIAM F. SMITH

Bowing to the skyjacker's demand,
Air West handed him four hundred grand.
With the bills in a sack
And a chute on his back,
Things were going exactly as planned.

Accompanied by cash in profusion,
He'd float down to a forest's seclusion—
But his scheme was curtailed
When the parachute failed:
He had jumped to a hasty conclusion.

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a *NEW* short story by

CLARK HOWARD

The worst punishment was the fire hose. McKey would drag it down the stairs to the basement, have the night orderly turn on the faucet, and blast the line of boys with the spray. The force of the water drove them back against the rough wall and made them double up in protective crouches on the floor. As soon as their faces contorted in pain and they began to cry and plead, McKey would let them out of the basement, one by one, to half run, half stumble back upstairs to their cots, gasping for breath, drenched, pitiful.

The last one to cry, the one who took the hose blast the longest, the one who took the most punishment, the one who was the toughest was always the last one to be let go . . .

THE LAST ONE TO CRY

by CLARK HOWARD

Martin couldn't believe what he saw when he got back to the personnel office after lunch. Sitting at the desk of one of the employment interviewers was the man who had killed Freddie Walsh more than twenty years ago.

Pausing in the doorway, Martin stared across the room at him. It was McKey, Martin was certain of it. It was Old Man McKey.

Going into his own glass-partitioned office, Martin sat down, aware that his hands were trembling slightly on top of his desk. He busied himself with a few papers, waiting. As personnel manager, he had to review every employment application, so it would only be a few minutes before he knew for sure whether it was really Old Man McKey or only someone who looked like him. In the meantime,

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not only Martin's hands were a problem but his mouth had gone dry and the sandwich he had eaten for lunch was doing something inside him.

Leaving his office, he went to the water cooler, drew a paper cup of ice water, and, back at his desk, dropped a single Alka-Seltzer in it. The tablet took forever to dissolve because the water was so cold, but finally Martin gulped it down just as the personnel interviewer brought him the application.

"He's applying for the night watchman's position at the plant," she said.

"Okay."

The interviewer left, knowing that Martin would buzz her to return after he had reviewed the application. He forced himself to wait until he was alone before letting his eyes move down to the name on the application.

Edward McKey.

Martin had never known Old Man McKey's first name. Was there a chance this was a brother or a cousin who looked like him? Martin opened the application to the page listing previous employers. The second one from the top was Illinois State Training School for Boys.

It was him. It was Old Man McKey.

The man who had killed Freddie Walsh.

The trip from the Cook County Juvenile Detention Home was made in what looked like an ordinary school bus, except that it had a wire-grille separation between the driver's seat and the passenger section and an armed detention officer rode up front. Martin, who was twelve, sat next to a window and looked out at the countryside along the way. There were a dozen other boys on the bus—white, black, brown—all between twelve, the legal minimum, and sixteen, and they were all as tied up in frightened knots as Martin was, so there wasn't much conversation. None of them knew each other, except perhaps casually from holding-cells and dayrooms at the juvenile home, which didn't help any. For the most part, they were like strangers, all invited to a party to which none of them wanted to go but all of them had to.

The Illinois State Training School was located in St. Charles, Illinois, two counties west of Chicago on the highway to Iowa. It might as well have been in Asia, it was so completely foreign to Martin, who knew only the tenement streets of the city. While the color and terrain and natural beauty of the countryside stimulated

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a spark of fascination and appreciation deep inside him somewhere, at the same time his street instincts rose to exert immediate control over such thinking. It might be pretty, but how could one survive here? To survive, you needed doorways, alleys, rooftops.

A boy across the aisle moved over next to Martin. "You see them black-and-white cows back there?" he asked.

"Yeah," said Martin.

"I never knew there was black-and-white cows. I thought they was all brown."

Martin nodded his head. "Yeah—me, too." The boy was older than Martin, perhaps fourteen, and bigger, not quite as knotted with fear.

"Hey, where you from?" The question didn't mean from which city, it meant from which neighborhood—they were all from Chicago.

"West side," Martin answered. "Ashland and Van Buren."

"Yeah? I'm south side. Twenty-second and Sacramento. We weren't too far apart." He lowered his voice. "What they got you on?"

"I'm uncorrigible," Martin said. He was being sent to reform school for it, but didn't know what it meant and couldn't even pronounce it correctly. He supposed it had something to do with the fact that he had no father, his mother was a drug addict, he was a ward of the county, and he kept running away from every foster home they put him in.

"I'm down for burglary," the boy next to him said with an odd hint of mixed pride and fear. "Hey, my name's Freddie Walsh. What's yours?"

"Martin Howe."

Freddie studied him and grinned. "You sure do look young. I bet they call you Babyface."

Martin shrugged. "No."

"I think I'll call you that. Okay with you?"

Another shrug. "I guess so."

That's where Martin had gotten his reform-school nickname, from Freddie Walsh.

The kid Old Man McKey had killed.

After Martin had studied Edward McKey's employment application, he buzzed the personnel interviewer and she returned to his office.

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"Looks like he might do," Martin told her. "Run him through the routine."

The routine was the company's standard operating procedure for hiring new personnel. If an applicant, based on the information put in the application, appeared to fit the qualifications for a particular job, the person was told that they were being considered and would hear from the personnel office in a few days. The applicant's past employment, education, references, and other information were then checked by the personnel office, and if everything verified favorably the application was returned to Martin's desk for final scrutiny and hiring approval.

Martin had been personnel manager for two years, working his way up during a fourteen-year tenure from mailboy, office boy, clerk, interviewer, employment counselor, and, before his last promotion, assistant manager. The company, Wayne and Grayson, was a large paper-products firm specializing in flat stock for the printing of posters and outdoor billboards. It had plants in three states and a small national sales force. Martin was considered one of the bright young members of Wayne and Grayson's management team. He was dedicated, loyal, and ambitious. For nine years he had been attending university classes two nights a week, working toward a degree in business administration. He hoped to have that degree before he reached thirty-five.

In his office, after the interviewer took Edward McKey's application and returned to her desk, Martin continued to shift papers on his own desk, surreptitiously watching the man who had killed Freddie Walsh. McKey didn't appear to have changed much: he was still a sharp-edge-faced man with not quite a beak for a nose, hair combed straight back in a no-nonsense style, ears a touch too large for his skull. He seemed smaller to Martin, but that was simply perspective. When Martin had been twelve, McKey's angular body and solid, hairy arms had looked huge and intimidating. Now that Martin himself was a grown man, he realized that Edward McKey was no more than average size.

Martin watched the interviewer smile and shake hands with McKey and followed with his eyes as the older man left the office. McKey, he noted, still had the same loose-jointed, rolling-hip walk that Martin remembered from that first day in reform school.

Its formal name was the Illinois State Training School for Boys, but because it was near the town of St. Charles, it had long before

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become known to the boys who passed in and out of it as "Charleytown." The term "training school" was a euphemism in every sense. Very little training was given, unless digging potatoes, cutting weeds, mopping floors, and the like was considered some kind of apprenticeship. And by no stretch of the imagination was it a school. It was a prison.

Martin, Freddie Walsh, and the others from the bus were processed into the Reception and Detention Unit, a separate barracks for new arrivals. They were stripped, their hair cut off down to the scalp, watched carefully while they scrubbed and rescrubbed with thick bars of brown laundry soap, and their heads, feet, armpits, and pubic areas were dusted with great clouds of yellow powder from a can powered by a rubber pressure ball, then made to stand under cold showers until everything was rinsed off. Only then were they given their reform-school-issue clothing: dark-blue-denim trousers, light-blue-denim shirts, white briefs and undershirts, heavy grey socks, and black, state-manufactured shoes unfinished on the insides. —No belts, because a belt with a buckle, wrapped around one's fist with four or five inches dangling, was an extremely dangerous weapon when used correctly. Belts had been banned at Charleytown after three boys in one year had an eye picked out in belt fights.

The length of stay in R-and-D was two weeks. The boys were confined to the barracks and to a small, cyclone-fenced exercise yard except when they were summoned individually for their appointments with various institution staff. Physical examinations were first. The doctors usually found nothing currently wrong with the new arrivals—street mongrels somehow managed to remain healthy, or reasonably so. Martin was found to have scar tissue on both lungs, which was first suspected to be tuberculosis but was not. "Multiple healed lung abscesses," the doctor determined after additional X-rays. "Probably a result of untreated staphylococcal pneumonia."

Freddie Walsh had healed scars also; strap marks on his buttocks and back. Another boy, Philly, had a severe speech impediment apparently due to an enlarged tongue. A boy nicknamed Wildcat because of a violent temper with a very short fuse was obviously of little higher intelligence than a moron but there was nothing to be done for him, either. The state didn't have a facility for mental deficients in his age group. An Italian boy named Joey Lupo, who was called Loop after the downtown section of Chicago, had a crooked right eye about which nothing was done. "Both eyes have to have amblyopia to qualify for corrective surgery," the doctor told him.

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After medicals came dentals. There was one standard for everyone. Trench mouth was treated. Pyorrhea was treated. Ordinary cavities were let alone until they reached the pain threshold, then the tooth was extracted. Charleytown dentists didn't do fillings.

Psychological evaluations followed. All of them seemed to be sex-related. Look at this inkblot: does it remind you of a dirty picture? How many times a day do you masturbate? Have you ever had sex relations with a man? A relative? An animal? Draw a picture of a naked woman. The people asking the questions terrified most of the boys. They were all unsmiling, unblinking, softspoken, somehow threatening people whose very attitudes and demeanor seemed to scream: We know there's something terribly, terribly wrong with you! Mercifully, the evaluations were, for most new arrivals, brief. Only when a boy like Wildcat came along, a boy they could term a latent homicidal maniac or worse, was he resummoned again and again to be studied by the entire staff, his flaws discussed openly in front of him as if he were insensitive or deaf.

Job counseling, the biggest farce of all, was saved for last—probably, the boys decided, to give them a big laugh so they could be sent into the general population in a good frame of mind.

The counselor made checks on a printed form as he talked. "Ever had experience doing yard work?" he asked.

Yard work? Around Ashland and Van Buren? What the hell was a yard?

"Know anything about animals?" Yeah, sure. In the tenements, cats survived and dogs didn't.

"Ever worked as an office boy or messenger?" No.

"Ever worked as a busboy or kitchen helper?"

"I'm twelve, mister," Martin said. "You got to be sixteen to get a work permit."

The counselor's lips tightened. "All these questions are on the form. Just answer them."

When he got to the bottom of the form, the counselor asked the question Martin thought should have been on the top. "What kind of work, if any, *have* you done?"

"Pinboy in a bowling alley," Martin told him. After running away from his latest foster home, for a month before being caught and taken to juvenile hall, he had worked, and lived, in the Cascade Bowling Alley on West Madison Street. Spotting pins for two leagues a night, he'd earned enough to eat more or less regularly. He hid in the place until after it closed and slept on a divan in the ladies

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lounge. During the day, he wandered the streets or went to places where the juvenile officers never looked for runaways: the main library downtown, the museums, the art institute, the planetarium. When he needed clothes, he stole them from thrift shops—nobody expected you to steal secondhand clothes.

"That's all you've done, set pins?" The counselor smiled a humorless smile. "I guess this isn't your lucky day, then. When they built our recreation center, they left out a bowling alley. I'm assigning you to garbage detail. You won't need a work permit for that."

On their last day in R-and-D, Martin and the others were told to roll up their spare set of clothes and line up out front to be picked up by their house father. At Charleytown, the boys lived in barracks that were called "cottages" and were named after U.S. Presidents. The man in charge of each cottage was a house father. Wildcat was assigned to Buchanan Cottage, which was for what the psychiatric staff referred to as "troubled inmates." Philly went to Grant Cottage. Martin, Freddie Walsh, and Loop went to Polk. The house father who came for them had a sharp face and a loose-jointed, rolling-hipped walk.

Martin remained in his office a few minutes after five. When his staff was gone, he found Edward McKey's employment application and made a copy of it on the Xerox machine.

When he got home, Kevin, his eight-year-old, was waiting on the porch with his fielder's mitt and a ball. "Be out as soon as I change, Kev," Martin told his son. It was Kevin's first year in Little League and Martin gave him half an hour of practice every evening.

In the kitchen, Martin's wife Peg was basting a pork roast. With an oven mitt on one hand, ladle in the other, she was defenseless, so Martin set his briefcase down and proceeded to fondle her from behind.

"If you make me burn myself, Martin—"

"Hi, Daddy," said Ellie, their five-year-old, coming into the kitchen. She looked up at her parents with gap-toothed curiosity.

Martin let Ellie carry his briefcase into the master bedroom and sit on what she called "the big bed" while Martin changed into some scruffy clothes. Listening to her tales of the day, which included preschool, a spilt glass of Gatorade, and helping Mommy replant a flowerbox, Martin delighted that she was so much like Peg. Coming from the same tenements that Martin had, Peg, too, had grown up knowing the harsh side of life: an alcoholic father, a mother without

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happiness or hope, two brothers who became hoodlums, a sister who started prostituting under the stairs when she was fourteen. Peg had gone a different way, living by her own rules and standards, much as Martin had. Now, as a woman, she remembered the things she had missed as a child, and gave those things to Ellie. Because she and Ellie were so much alike, it was as if Peg were raising *herself,* and that delighted Martin. Just as it delighted Peg that Martin was doing the same thing with Kevin.

When Martin was ready, he said, "Want to come practice catching with your brother and me?"

"I already had my bath," Ellie said. "If I play baseball, will I have to take another one?"

"Probably."

"Then I don't want to."

Martin and Kevin had their practice session, then showered and dressed for supper. Afterward, the kids watched television while their parents cleaned up the kitchen. Then, as they did three nights a week, they had family hour, the four of them alternating at selecting the activity, which ranged from playing Hide-the-Button, Ellie's usual choice, to naming animals, articles of clothing, etc., which started with each letter of the alphabet, a game Martin had created. Sometimes the activity was simply going for a walk.

In bed later that night, Martin asked, "Did I ever tell you about a kid I knew in Charleytown named Freddie Walsh?"

"I don't remember," Peg said drowsily. She liked to float in and out of sleep after they made love—she called it her afterglow. "You've told me about so many."

"This kid died in there."

"I don't think you ever told me about anybody who died." She drifted for a moment, then came back. "Why?"

"Nothing, really. I was just reminded of him today." He pulled the sheet over her shoulder. "Go on to sleep, honey," he said quietly.

After Peg's breathing became even, Martin remained awake for a long time, staring at a memory as vivid in his mind as if it had happened that day.

"My name is Mr. McKey," the edge-faced man said. "I'm your house father. You will always address me and refer to me as 'Mister' and you will always say 'sir' when speaking to me. Any time you fail to do so will result in your receiving a demerit. Ten demerits will result in punishment."

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McKey's eyes swept the six faces before him: Martin, Freddie, Loop, and three others. "Form a single-file line and follow me," he ordered. "No talking."

McKey led them to the cottage. In an anteroom just inside the double-doored entrance, he had them stop and directed their attention to a small bulletin board. On it was thumbtacked a newspaper clipping with a headline that read: BILLY McKEY MAKES ALL-STATE. There was a photo in the clipping of a handsome, smiling boy of fourteen, wearing a football helmet.

"My son Billy," said McKey. "He made the varsity team his first year in high school. He was the only freshman ever named to an all-state football team. I put news about Billy on this board to show the boys in my cottage what a decent kid does with his life. Might encourage some of you to change your ways." McKey's eyes narrowed slightly. "It is a requirement of this cottage that you read everything I put on the board about Billy. I sometimes ask questions about it. Anyone who can't answer correctly is given a demerit."

From the anteroom, McKey took them into the dormitory, assigned each of them a cot, and demonstrated how it was to be made up. "Improperly made cots get you a demerit." Each boy was given a locker. McKey showed them how their spare clothing and towel were to be placed. "Failure to keep your locker neat gets a demerit." He showed them the shower room. "Wasting soap gets a demerit. Not turning the water off all the way gets a demerit."

At one point, when McKey's back was turned, Freddie Walsh whispered to Martin, "Breathing too much air gets a demerit."

McKey's head snapped around in time to catch the last movement of Freddie's lips. "Whispering behind a house father's back gets a demerit," he said, taking a small spiral notebook and pencil from his shirt pocket. "Walsh, isn't it?"

Freddie would soon learn, as would Martin, Loop, and the other newcomers, that life at Charleytown was a never-ending, usually futile effort to avoid demerits. It was practically impossible to do—there were too many pitfalls. An unbuttoned shirt collar got a demerit. Raising your voice got a demerit. Failure to clean your tray in the dining hall got a demerit—as did not being where you were supposed to be when the whistle was blown, looking at the body of a female staff member, walking on the wrong side of a sidewalk, any kind of horseplay, communicating with boys from another cottage, stepping on the grass, spitting, closing a door too loudly. A shirttail hanging out, even an expression on your face that the house

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father didn't like resulted in demerits, as did a multitude of other indiscretions, most of them committed innocently, carelessly, thoughtlessly, or playfully. Most of the kids sent to Charleytown were old beyond their years to begin with. At Charleytown, they got much older.

Martin, Freddie, and Loop decided to stick together for their mutual protection. Freddie, a little older and a lot tougher, was the natural leader of the trio. Because he had red hair, and because he was hard, he got the nickname Brick. It soon became common knowledge in Polk Cottage that anybody who messed with Babyface or Loop messed with Brick. And anybody Brick couldn't handle by himself Babyface and Loop would help him with. And anybody the three of them couldn't handle behind the barracks in the daytime they could always get in the middle of the night, because even the toughest kid had to sleep sometime.

The actual boss of the cottage was Lightning, a handsome black kid with corded muscles and extraordinarily fast hands—hence his nickname. He left Babyface, Brick, and Loop alone because it wasn't worth his while to do otherwise. None of them got an allowance from home, and only Loop got food packages on visiting day, the first Sunday of every month. Freddie's mother never brought him anything and Martin never had a visitor. For Lightning to have hassled three guys for a share of one box of food a month—Italian food at that—would have been stupid.

While Freddie went out on the field crew every day to hoe weeds and Loop reported to the institution laundry to operate a hand-cranked wringer, Martin rode the big garbage truck that came through the gate twice a day to collect all kitchen waste and shop trash. He hung onto the rear of the truckbed with a black kid, Jazz, so named because he was always jiving and shucking. At every stop they hopped off, hoisted the fifty-five-gallon drums of garbage, and emptied them into the truckbed.

The driver, a townsman who contracted the work, said the same thing to them at every stop: "Come on, you punks, snap it up! I ain't got all day!" Jazz and Babyface never varied their speed. At the end of every day, when the truck dropped them back at Polk Cottage, Mr. McKey would ask the driver how the two boys had performed and the driver would also give a variation of the same reply: "Slow. I could get outta here half an hour earlier if they was to work faster. They're just too lazy to do it. I can see why they're where they are." Every day, McKey would give each of them a demerit.

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Just working on the garbage truck got them enough demerits to qualify for punishment three times a month.

"I'd like to drive down and see Loop in the morning," Martin told Peg on Friday night. "You didn't have anything planned for me, did you?"

"We promised to take the kids to that carnival at the mall, but that's not until midafternoon. You'll be back by then, won't you?"

"Sure."

"Don't forget to take the kids' new school pictures," Peg reminded him. "You know how he likes to watch them grow up."

"I've already got them in my wallet," Martin said.

He got up early Saturday and drove down to Stateville, the maximum-security penitentiary north of Joliet. At the visitor entrance, he filled out a short form and gave it to a corrections officer at the counter. The officer keyed the name "Lupo, Joseph Angelo" and his inmate number into a computer terminal. After verifying that Martin's name was on the inmate's approved visitor list, Martin was passed into a second room, where the contents of his pockets were scrutinized and where, as usual, his key ring had to be left behind because his briefcase key was too similar in design to a handcuffs key. He then went through a metal detector, was given a visitor pass, and let inside.

The visiting room was long and narrow, divided by an anchored table running from one end to the other. A white line was painted down the middle of the table and officers sat on elevated chairs at either end to make certain that nothing ever crossed that line. When Martin entered his side of the room, he gave the school photos of Kevin and Ellie to an officer to be given to Loop.

As Loop entered his side of the room, he waved, winked his still-crossed right eye at Martin, and broke into a delighted grin when the guard handed him the photos. On their respective sides of the table, he and Martin moved to the middle of the room, putting themselves as far from each officer as possible.

"Jeez, Babyface, these kids look great," Loop said as he sat down, holding a photo in each hand. "Kevin looks just like you used to. And this Ellie, is she gonna be a heartbreaker. Look at that smile. I can't believe how fast they're growing up. Jeez." Loop had never seen Martin's children in person. He had been in prison since before they were born and knew them only through photographs and spoken and written description. Peg, whom he had also never met, wrote

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him a chatty letter once a month. Martin visited him half a dozen times a year and they put what they could afford into his commissary account. It was understood between them, without being discussed, that Martin would never bring his family to the prison.

Loop put the photos aside and the two men discussed generalities for a while—how the Cubs and White Sox were doing, the ridiculous mess the heavyweight division was in, whether Martin would buy a car now or wait for the new models, the lack of rain throughout the Midwest, Loop's job in the prison bindery where state schoolbooks were bound, Martin's job in the personnel office.

Finally Martin lowered his voice almost to a whisper and said, "Loop, where can I get a piece that can't be traced?"

The convict frowned. "Where can—? What the hell for?" he asked, his voice even lower than Martin's, his lips barely moving.

"I need one," Martin said.

"I asked what for," Loop repeated. His expression hardened. "Don't play no games with me, Babyface," he said firmly.

Martin swallowed dryly. "Remember Old Man McKey?"

"The Charleytown screw? Sure. Who could forget that bum?"

"He came into my office the other day for a night watchman's job."

Loop's mouth dropped open in surprise. "I'll be damned," he said incredulously.

The two men locked eyes as they remembered a promise they had made to each other long ago.

Punishment in Polk Cottage was administered every night at seven-thirty. Any boy who had accumulated ten demerits was called into the anteroom by Mr. McKey, who returned from his home in town after supper each evening to personally supervise the punishment period. When punishment was over and the boys all locked in the dormitory, McKey would then leave, turning the cottage over to a night orderly who stayed on duty in the office until the house father returned the following morning.

There was hardly a boy who didn't receive demerits for failing to answer questions McKey would randomly ask, without warning, about items he had put on the bulletin board regarding his son Billy. Not only sports items (BILLY McKEY CATCHES WINNING PASS, BILLY McKEY LEADS VARSITY TO BASKETBALL TOURNAMENT, BILLY McKEY SETS NEW STATE RECORD FOR 100-YARD DASH), but items from a Boy Scout newsletter (BILLY McKEY EARNS 15TH MERIT BADGE), a Presbyterian Church

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bulletin (BILLY McKEY SELECTED AS VACATION BIBLE SCHOOL TEACHER FOR YOUNGER CHILDREN), a high-school newspaper (BILLY McKEY NEW R.O.T.C. LIEUTENANT, BILLY McKEY ELECTED SOPHOMORE CLASS PRESIDENT), and a National Honor Society magazine (BILLY McKEY EARNS 4.0 SCHOLASTIC AVERAGE FOR THIRD STRAIGHT YEAR).

It wasn't that the kids in Polk Cottage didn't read everything Mr. McKey tacked up—they did. It was just that they were unable to understand most of it, couldn't individually identify with it and therefore were unable to remember it. They knew nothing about the Boy Scouts, the R.O.T.C., or the National Honor Society. Most of the time the news they read of All-American boy Billy McKey was simply a lot of words that didn't register. And that was how McKey caught them.

"You there, Walsh," he would challenge, "name the softball team that my boy Billy pitched a shutout against last week."

Freddie thought and shrugged. "I can't remember, Mr. McKey, sir."

Out came the spiral notebook. "That's a demerit, Walsh."

And: "You, Lupo. When Billy won the high-school debating contest, what subject did he debate?"

Loop's expression twisted into a squinting frown. "What does 'subject' mean, Mr. McKey?"

"It means another demerit for you, Lupo."

Or: "You, Howe. What organization wrote about my boy's perfect grade average?"

"The National Grade Society," Martin tried.

"Close, Howe, but not close enough. One demerit. Pay more attention to what you read next time."

Punishment varied. Pushups were the most common for the younger kids. Those a little older were made to hold their arms straight out in front of them, palms down, with a length of two-by-four wood laid across the backs of their hands. Within minutes it made them feel as if their arms were being torn out of their sockets and their necks were going to burst.

There was also the Spot, a white circle on the floor near the wall in which a kid had to stand, looking at a white line on the wall. Freddie Walsh set the record for standing on the Spot: eleven hours and twenty minutes before he dropped. Most kids fainted long before that.

And there was Old Faithful—Mr. McKey's leather strap. Old

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Faithful was optional. Instead of pushups, the two-by-four, or the Spot, Mr. McKey occasionally let a boy choose a predetermined number of strokes with the strap. The licks had to be taken in undershorts, without trousers, while leaning over a straight chair.

The worst punishment by far was the fire hose. It hung rolled up in a wooden box on the wall of the anteroom, connected to a large faucet next to the box. Long enough to stretch far into the dormitory, it also could stretch down a short flight of stairs to the basement of the cottage. The basement was empty except for the furnace that heated the cottage in winter. There was a brick wall near the bottom of the steps and Martin's second summer at Charleytown McKey came up with the idea of making the boys with enough demerits line up naked in front of the wall. He would drag the fire hose down the stairs, have the night orderly turn on the faucet, and blast the line of boys with the spray. The force of the water drove them back against the rough wall and made them double up in protective crouches on the floor.

As soon as their faces contorted in pain and they began to cry and plead, McKey would let them out of the basement, one by one, to half run, half stumble back upstairs to their cots, gasping for breath, drenched, pitiful. The last one to cry, the one who took the hose blast the longest, the one who took the most punishment, the one who was the toughest, the biggest hardhead was always the last one to be let go.

It was usually Freddie Walsh.

The thing about Freddie that rankled Old Man McKey the most was that sometimes Freddie refused to cry at all, refused to plead. Sometimes Freddie got it into his head that he would take whatever McKey handed out, all of it, without backing down. Times like that, he would curl his naked body into a ball on the floor next to the brick wall and let McKey hit him with the fire-hose spray for long minutes after all the other boys had been allowed upstairs. With one shoulder and one hand protecting his ears, the other hand protecting his testicles, Freddie would press against the floor and the wall, his eyes shut tightly, his jaw clenched between gasps of air, making McKey stand there until his arms ached from holding the heavy, bucking hose. The house father would direct the blast of water at Freddie's head, neck, shoulders, back, buttocks—any part that was exposed. When the pain of the water's impact became too much on one spot, Freddie would shift position and McKey would select a new target on the boy's body. He soon learned that the most

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vulnerable places seemed to be the lower back just above the hipbone on either side. The more he could hit Freddie there, the quicker Freddie was likely to cry.

McKey usually won the battles of will between them. Only on a few rare occasions did he yell up to have the hose turned off before Freddie conceded to his pain and pleaded for relief. On those occasions, Old Man McKey would be glowering darkly when he left for the night.

The last night that Freddie outlasted the Old Man, he did it because he passed out. He was unconscious when the water stopped. The boys in the dorm watched out the windows as Freddie was taken to the infirmary on a stretcher. They never saw him again. McKey announced a couple of days later that Freddie was all right and had been transferred to another cottage. Babyface and Loop found out differently. They managed to slip over to Roosevelt Cottage, where the infirmary workers were quartered, and talked to one of the boys there.

"He wasn't transferred, man," the boy told them in confidence. "That kid died. His kidneys quit working. The docs couldn't figure out why."

Late that night, crying together in the cottage shower room in the dark, Babyface and Loop made their promise to each other. Somehow, sometime, one or both of them would kill Old Man McKey.

"You're crazy," Loop muttered across the visiting-room table. "You're out of your goddamned skull if you think I'm gonna put you onto a piece. You don't owe Freddie nothing."

"We took an oath, Loop," Martin reminded him.

"That was kid stuff. We ain't kids any more."

"Someone's got to get even for what McKey did." Martin's tone was becoming as determined as his friend's.

"Get *even?* Christ, you sound like half the guys in the joint here. There's no such thing as getting even, kid. You're lucky in life if you just *break* even." Loop leaned forward as far as the white line would permit. His voice became softer but more urgent. "Listen to me," he said. "You're one of the lucky ones, one of the very few who were able to crawl up out of the sewer and live in the sunshine. You've got a sweet wife, two great kids, a house, a decent job. Don't you know what that's *worth?*" He sat back and began silently drumming his fingertips on the tabletop, his patience ebbing.

"Look at me, kid. I'm only a couple of years older than you but I

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look ten years older. I'm doing life as a habitual criminal. Remember Philly, the kid with the big tongue who couldn't talk right? He got blown away in a liquor-store holdup. The owner's wife came out of the back room and plowed him under with a four-ten shotgun. Remember Wildcat, the little punk with the bad temper? He's on Death Row out in California—killed a highway patrolman who pulled him over for speeding. A *traffic ticket,* for God's sake, and the guy's sweating out the gas chamber.

"Remember Jazz, the black kid you worked with on the garbage truck? He turned into a junkie and died in a doorway from an OD of heroin. And Lightning, the big black kid that ran the cottage? Know what he is today? The leader of a gang of strongarmers around Twelfth and Kedzie that call themselves the Ebony Stallions and shake down their own people for a living."

The convict took a quick breath and stopped drumming his fingers. His hard, criminal eyes fixed on Martin like cannon directed at an enemy.

"If you think you owe Freddie Walsh anything, you're a goddamned fool. Freddie got off easy. He wouldn't have been like you, he would have been like *us.* Me and Philly and Jazz and the rest. He would've stayed in the sewer all his life." Loop shook his head. "I won't tell you where to get a gun. 'Cause I won't help you kill yourself. And that's what you'd be doing if you killed Old Man McKey—killing yourself."

Martin shielded his eyes with one hand and stared at the table. Loop put both hands flat on his side of the line and did the same. A heavy silence fell between them, awkward, uncomfortable, unfamiliar to both of them after so many friendly, easy visits. A minute seemed like ten, then Martin took his hand down and nodded slowly.

"You're right, Loop," he said quietly, forcing a weak smile. "I guess I just needed somebody to remind me of that. Thanks. I owe you one."

Loop shrugged. "You don't owe me nothing. It's them you owe," he said, bobbing his chin at the school photos of Martin's children.

A corrections officer came over and put a slip of paper on the table in front of Loop, indicating that the time allowed for the visit was up. Martin and Loop walked along their respective sides to the officer at the entrance, where Loop gave him the photos to pass back to Martin.

"So long, Loop," said Martin. "Thanks."

The convict winked his bad right eye again. "Take care, kid."

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Martin left the prison and crossed the visitor parking lot, Loop's words rebounding in his mind. The one thing that never occurred to Martin was that Loop would decline to stand by his promise. Loop was the one person he had been sure would understand and help. Freddie Walsh had been their friend, at times he had been their protector. He had come from the same streets they had—been kicked in the teeth by the same society, judged by the same establishment, condemned by the same authority. But most of all, Freddie had always been the last one to cry. For that, if nothing else, he deserved to be avenged.

And Loop, although he did not realize it, *had* told Martin where to get a gun to do it.

The drive into Chicago took an hour. On the way, Martin stopped at a branch of the bank with which he did business and at an automatic teller machine withdrew three hundred dollars with his bank card. When he reached the city, he headed for the heart of the southwest side. It was all black now; there wasn't a white face in sight as he guided the car along Kedzie Avenue. Some of the people on the sidewalk glared at him as he drove past—wondering what I am, Martin thought: bill collector, parole officer, slum landlord. Simply by his color he was an alien here, an enemy. And he felt it—by the time he got to Twelfth Street, his shirt was wet with perspiration halfway down the sleeves.

He had anticipated problems once he got to the neighborhood, but his anxiety was alleviated as soon as he turned the corner into Twelfth. A few doors from the intersection he saw a storefront building with its windows painted black and a sign reading: THE EBONY STALLIONS CLUB. In smaller letters it advised MEMBERS ONLY. Martin let out a sigh of relief. But he kept sweating.

Parking, he got out and locked his car, wondering if he would make it across the sidewalk where several unsmiling youths were regarding him ominously. Tough and bluff, Martin remembered from his own youth. Never show fear. Walking around his car, he gave the youths a cursory glance and went past them as if they weren't there. He heard some obscene comments behind his back and ignored them as a terrifying thought entered his mind: if the door to the Ebony Stallions Club was locked—

It wasn't. Inside, the place was arranged like a neighborhood lounge: bar, booths, a few tables, postage-stamp dance floor. There were a dozen men, several women, and a bartender in the place.

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When Martin entered, they all looked at him as if they couldn't believe their eyes. Not even white *cops* walked into the Ebony Stallions Club. Several of the men rose and stood threateningly. The bartender came to the end of the bar, staring.

Martin walked over to him.

"I'm looking for a man called Lightning," he said.

They all kept staring at him. No one spoke.

"I don't know him by any other name," Martin said. "I only know him as Lightning."

Still the stares, still the silence.

"I'm a friend of his," Martin said, not very convincingly.

The bartender smirked. "One thing Lightning ain't got is no white friends."

A couple of the men who had stood up now began moving slowly toward the bar. Tough and bluff, Martin thought again. He put one hand under the front of his coat as if he might be armed. "You'd better let Lightning decide whether I'm a friend or not," he told the bartender curtly. "Just say Babyface is here. From Charleytown."

They all studied Martin for a moment longer, then one of the men nodded and the others sat back down and resumed drinking. The man who had nodded strode to the front door and left. Martin took his hand from under his coat.

The bartender pondered for a moment, then asked, "You want a drink?"

Martin had never wanted one more badly. "Vodka on the rocks," he said.

He had half the drink inside him a few minutes later when the man who had left returned with a tall, handsome, immaculately groomed black man who, unlike Loop, did not look as if he had aged five years in the twenty since Charleytown.

"Well, well," said Lightning, "Babyface."

Smiling, he held out a hand.

An hour later, Martin was driving back downstate. In the glove compartment of his car, with the copy of Edward McKey's employment application, was a loaded .380 automatic.

"It's as cold as a piece can be," Lightning had told him. "Made illegally in Italy, smuggled in through Haiti, never registered in the U.S. Doesn't even have a manufacturer's name or serial number on it—and no ballistics record anywhere. Absolutely no way it can be traced."

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Lightning had refused to take Martin's money. He seemed genuinely pleased that Martin lived inside the law and had a family, and talked about his own two sons, both illegitimate by different women, both on the streets, one on drugs, but apparently some hope for the other one. "The boy likes classical music," Lightning revealed, as if it were some strange miracle. "I've told him I'll get him into the London Conservatory if he stays in line and finishes high school."

Lightning hadn't asked why Martin wanted the cold gun and Martin hadn't volunteered the information. His street instincts, never dormant, told him that the fewer people who could connect him with McKey's killing the better.

Martin got back home in time to take Peg and the kids to the carnival.

"You were gone longer than usual," Peg said. "Anything the matter?"

"The car stalled on me a couple of times," Martin told her. He detested having to lie to Peg, but it fit in with his alibi for getting out of the house that night. "After supper, I think I'll run it over to Mac's all-night garage and have it checked. The carburetor probably needs cleaning."

The carnival was fun for Peg and the kids, and Martin managed to give the impression he was enjoying himself. His only bad moment came at the shooting gallery where he was trying to win a kewpie doll for Ellie. All the targets looked like Old Man McKey and Martin's hands sweat so much he couldn't control the pellet rifle. "We'll try again next time there's a carnival, honey," he told the little girl. She was disappointed only as far as the cotton-candy stand.

After the carnival, they went to a Pizza Hut to eat. It was eight o'clock when they finally got home. "I'll run the car over while you put the kids to bed," Martin said as casually as he could. "I shouldn't be more than an hour or so."

On his way out, he went through the garage and picked up a pair of cotton work gloves. They would alleviate his sweating palms and prevent fingerprints. Lightning, holding the pistol in a handkerchief, had shown Martin how to jack a round into the chamber and set the safety, then he had wiped off the weapon carefully and wrapped it in the handkerchief.

When Martin had got back to town that afternoon he had driven past Edward McKey's house before going home, so he knew exactly

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where it was. All he had to do now, he thought as he got in his car, was go over there and kill the son of a bitch.

Martin parked half a block away, around the corner from an alley that ran behind McKey's house. Pulling on the cotton gloves, he unwrapped the gun and put it in his windbreaker pocket. Leaving his car unlocked, he walked away from McKey's street. A few feet past the alley, he stepped into the shadows next to a tree. For a few moments he stood there, eyes and ears measuring the dark little street. All was quiet.

Moving out of his concealment, he entered the alley and hurried along behind the houses on McKey's street.

McKey lived in the fifth house from the corner. Martin had been surprised earlier that day to find that it was a tacky little place in a rundown neighborhood. He had always imagined McKey living in the kind of home he used to see in Andy Hardy movies.

Martin counted back-yard gates as he moved along the alley, which was darker than the street had been. At the fifth gate, he stopped and scrutinized what he could see across the yard. There was one light on in the rear of the house, probably the kitchen—nothing else. With one hand, he rattled the gate very quietly to see if there might be a dog in the yard. All remained quiet.

Carefully opening the gate, he entered and walked stealthily up to the back porch. The steps were wooden, so he used the inside edge where they were less likely to creak, testing each one before putting his entire weight on it. Odd, he thought, how some things you never forgot.

Peering in the window, Martin saw a cluttered little kitchen, with someone in a wheelchair, back to the window, pushed up to a table. He frowned. He couldn't see all of the kitchen, but there was another window to the other side of the kitchen door through which he might. He started toward it.

The porch light suddenly came on, the back door opened, and Edward McKey stepped out with a sack of garbage in one hand. He and Martin saw each other and each stepped back, startled.

"Who are you?" McKey asked fearfully. "What do you want?"

There's a witness, Martin thought tensely. The person in the wheelchair.

"Mr. McKey," Martin said in a controlled voice, "I'm the personnel manager over at Wayne and Grayson, where you applied for the night watchman's job. I happened to be driving by and thought I'd

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stop in for a minute. I knocked at the front door but I guess you didn't hear me."

"Guess I didn't," McKey said. He put the sack in a garbage can on the porch. "Come in," he said, "Mr.—"

"Howe. Martin Howe."

The name didn't seem to register on McKey. Martin followed him into the kitchen.

"Excuse the mess," McKey said. "My missus passed away a few years ago. There's just me and the boy here." He gestured toward the wheelchair. "I'm not much of a housekeeper."

Martin looked at the figure in the wheelchair. Not a boy at all, but a young man two years older than Martin, with a face that Martin still recognized from the many pictures he had seen of it on the Polk Cottage bulletin board. Billy McKey. His head slumped slightly to one side. There was a line of spittle drooling from the corner of his mouth and his eyes stared unblinkingly at nothing.

No witness, after all.

Martin put his hand on the gun in his pocket.

"I guess it's too much to hope that you stopped by to tell me I got the job," McKey half stated, half inquired. "I sure do need it because of the boy here. I have to work nights because it costs too much to hire somebody to look after him during the day, when he needs a lot of tending to. But a widow lady next door has agreed to stay over nights while he's sleeping. If I can just get a good night job, things ought to work out good for us."

"What's the matter with your son, Mr. McKey?" Martin asked. He had to be sure there was no witness.

McKey shrugged self-consciously and looked away. "Drugs. He got mixed up with them in college. He had everything in the world going for him: looks, personality, intelligence, athletic ability. Threw it all away for drugs. He used too much of that angel-dust stuff one night and went into a coma. When he came out of it, he was the way you see him now—a vegetable."

"Can't talk or anything?" Martin asked.

McKey shook his head. "He can't even think."

Martin slipped the safety off the pistol. His eyes flicked from McKey to Billy and back to McKey. His finger tightened on the trigger a fraction.

"Why *did* you stop by, Mr. Howe?" McKey asked, squeezing his son's shoulder.

Martin gazed at the tense hand on the shoulder, then relaxed

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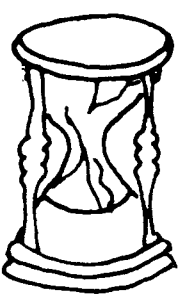
own hand and put the safety back on. "To tell you that you got the job," he said. "Come by the personnel office Monday morning. Ask for me."

McKey swallowed with difficulty. "You don't know what this means to me," he said, almost choking on the words. "We've had it pretty hard, me and the boy—"

"I'm sure things will be better for you now," Martin told him encouragingly. "See you Monday. Goodnight."

He left as he had come in, by the back door. Passing the window, he glanced in and saw McKey on his knees, face buried in the blanket on Billy's lap, sobbing. And Martin thought, Freddie Walsh hadn't been the last one to cry, after all.



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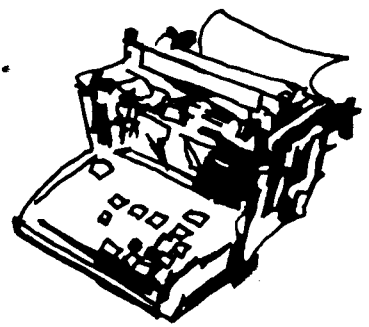

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ELLERY QUEEN

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING ORDER FORM

Send to **ELLERY QUEEN MAGAZINE**
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380 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017

20 WORD MINIMUM
Only $59.00 for 20 Words or Less
$2.95 each additional word
Capitalized words add—40¢ per word
SAVE 15% WITH 3 CONSECUTIVE MONTHS SAME COPY ORDER

DEADLINE: Copy and payment must be in by the 5th day of the third preceding month for issue in which ad is to appear.

(PLEASE PRINT OR TYPE)

YOUR NAME_____

FIRM (NAME IN AD)_____

ADDRESS_____

CITY_____ **STATE**_____ **ZIP**_____

PHONE:_____ **DATE:**_____

YOUR SIGNATURE_____

_____ Words at $2.95 each $ .....

_____ Capitalized word at .40¢ each _____
Total amount for 1 ad $

15% Savings with 3 Consecutive Months Discount

(a) Multiply one ad total $_____ x 3 = $ .....
(b) Multiply total amount on above line by x .85

(c) Total amount for 3 ads $

(Example. One 20 word ad $59.00 x 3 months = $177.00 x .85 = $150.45)

$_____ is enclosed for _____ insertion(s) in the _____ issue(s) _____ Heading

(FOR ADDITIONAL WORDS ATTACH SEPARATE SHEET)

(1) **$59.00**	(2) **$59.00**	(3) **$59.00**	(4) **$59.00**	(5) **$59.00**
(6) **$59.00**	(7) **$59.00**	(8) **$59.00**	(9) **$59.00**	(10) **$59.00**
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(16) **$59.00**	(17) **$59.00**	(18) **$59.00**	(19) **$59.00**	(20) **$59.00**
(21) **$61.95**	(22) **$64.90**	(23) **$67.85**	(24) **$70.80**	(25) **$73.75**
(26) **$76.70**	(27) **$79.65**	(28) **$82.60**	(29) **$85.55**	(30) **$88.50**

HOW TO COUNT WORDS: Name and address must be included in counting the number of Words in your ad. Each initial or number counts as 1 word: Mark Holly, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017: 7 WORDS: Zip codes are not counted. Phone #: 2 Words. Symbols used as keys are charged for. City or State count as 1 word each.: Garden City, New York: 2 words. Abbreviations such as C.O.D., F.O.B., P.O., U.S.A, 7x10, 35mm count as 1 word. *(P.O. Box 145 count as 3 words)* Webster's International Unabridged Dictionary will be used as our authority for spelling, compound words, hyphens, abreviations, etc. **Please make checks payable to ELLERY QUEEN MAGAZINE.**

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10 *NEW* stories—including

CLARK HOWARD (about a scalplock)

EDWARD D. HOCH (about Rand)

NELL LAMBURN (about thatching)

ROBERT TWOHY (about a dead nobody)

PETER LOVESEY (about a barber)

THOMAS LARRY ADCOCK (about Neil Hockaday)

WILLIAM BANKIER (about a disc jockey)

AVRAM DAVIDSON (about the patient cup)

plus a chapter from Simon Brett's A SHOCK TO THE SYSTEM

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RALPH RUBINO ..... *Corporate Art Director*
GERARD HAWKINS ..... *Associate Art Director*
MARIANNE WELDON ..... *Associate Designer*
CARL BARTEE ..... *Director of Manufacturing*
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VALERIE BARTLETT ..... *Production Assistant*
LOUISE MUGAR ..... *Circulation Director, Retail Marketing*
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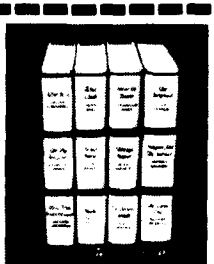

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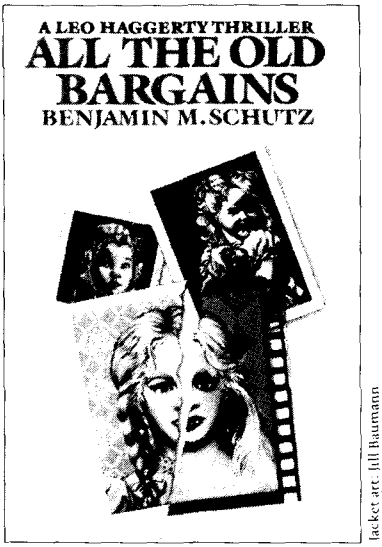

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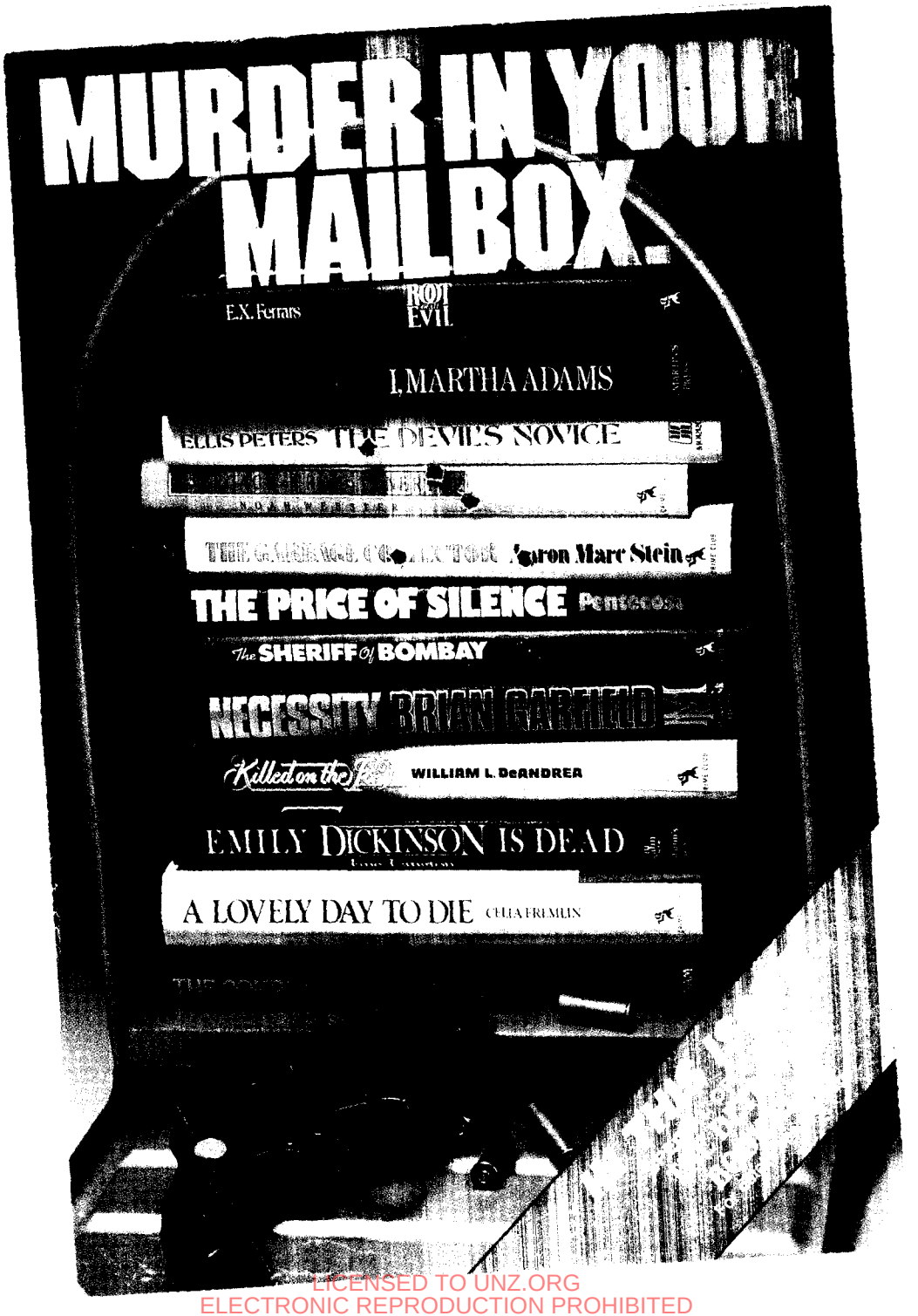

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